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Contents

<i>Only the Ring Finger Knows.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Extra Chapter: A Spring Break Secret.....</i>	<i>205</i>
<i>Extra Chapter: The Week Until the Ring Finger.....</i>	<i>243</i>
<i>Afterword.....</i>	<i>201</i>



Only the Ring Finger Knows

Their first impression upon meeting was awful.

He had smooth good looks, he was talented at every sport, his grades were at the top of his class and everybody knew him. He was a perfect teacher's pet, he was nice to everyone, he had impeccable courtesy and an unforgettable presence. His reputation had spread as far as neighboring schools, and he boasted an unabating popularity as the "Ideal Prince" of the girls. That was Yuichi Kazuki.

Yet despite all that...

"... Don't give me orders," Yuichi told him with a frigid look, when they happened to stand side by side at the school water fountain. He was practically enveloped in an air of unrelenting hostility toward him, like he had just met someone who had killed his parents or some destined nemesis.

That was why Wataru Fujii had no idea.

No idea of the desire deep within his eyes, no idea of the confession sealed within his lips.

No idea of the tiny secret concealed within the mixed-up rings with the same design.

Ever since that day, Wataru's chest had always ached.

At first, he was sad over how coldly he was

treated. The smiling face Yuichi shared with everyone else rejected him alone. It pained him to be the target of nothing but sneering and sarcastic words.

Before long, he noticed himself caring for Yuichi. His desires were miraculously fulfilled, even after finding the place where the identical rings belonged.

But Wataru's chest still ached like before.

It was a pain that went unnoticed until he came to care for someone. However happy he was, even when Yuichi was smiling, his chest ached all the same.

And thus—he continued to pray.

May we be together, be it for a minute or a mere second.

May you always smile for me at my side.

“So what I’m gettin’ at is, why the hell do people like that exist in society?!” Wataru Fujii grumbled loudly before chugging down the rest of his can of beer. He drew closer toward his best friend, who was leaning back slightly and observing him.

“Am I right or what, Kawamura? You followin’ what I’m sayin’? Am I right?”

“I feel like we’ve been through this whole thing before...”

“Look, I mean, this Yuichi Kazuki guy, you wouldn’t believe how big he acts around me, the way he acts talking crap about others. He’s perverse and vain, and for all that godawful personality of his, he still looks kind of... no, he looks really fine, and sometimes his conscience surprises me. He talks it up, but deep

down he's nice and serious, always considering my feelings..."

"... Are you bitching about him or praising him? Make up your mind."

"I'm gettin' to that! So what the hell is a guy like that doing sending back a ring out of the damned blue?!"

Tomoaki Kawamura went silent with an expression of mixed feelings, making out bits and pieces of his friend's situation while wondering to himself, *what am I supposed to say to that?*

Wataru grew more dejected upon seeing his usually chatty friend giving such a sober response.

Aw man, how did it get this way, anyway...?

It was back when the painstaking exam period had just passed, and all that was left was to wait for graduation.

The two of them had each passed their exams to get into their respective first college of choice. They were holding a little celebration in Kawamura's room while his family was out of the house. But Wataru was already half-despairing, and as he drank more beer, he gradually slipped into a drunken depression. It was all because of his lover's irrational actions.

I'm so hopeless. However much Kawamura knows about Kazuki and I... I'm just too soft.

Sorry, he apologized from the bottom of his heart.

Kawamura had been a good listener for him even before this. He had cheered on Wataru's homosexual romance with Yuichi Kazuki from the shadows, and he

had never shown the slightest hint of prejudice. Their relationship was discreet, and the small handful of people like Kawamura and his own younger sister Karin who knew about it were great boons to Wataru, who couldn't open up about it to others.

But this time, it seemed that even Kawamura could offer no words of consolation.

"Wataru, I... like you." Yuichi's voice rang out with sincerity across the ocean, over the phone.

He spoke as though he might miss out on his chance forever if he didn't say it now, and Wataru could tell that the situation for Yuichi had suddenly changed in some way. But Wataru had never expected Yuichi to extend his stay in New York, much less to send back his counterpart ring, which he treasured more than anything.

Ugh, what is he thinking? This isn't some cheap accessory or souvenir. It's something special, isn't it? Didn't it bind us together? How could he send this ring back by itself without a word...?

Wataru was in considerable shock, and it was certainly understandable. The ring Yuichi had sent back to him was a memento, one that had led to the two of them going out. Rings had been popular at their school at the time, and mistakenly switching out two rings with the same design had been the beginning of it all. Wataru learned afterward that Yuichi had made a replica of Wataru's ring because he had a secret crush, and after a lot of twists and turns, they finally realized their love, and Wataru's feelings grew rather strong.

I couldn't have been the only one out of us that

felt that way... right?

The return of the ring must have had something to do with his return home being postponed. Wataru had a hunch on that. But regardless of the reason, he had been unable to reach Yuichi since then. Because of that, anxiety swelled unabated within him, and he couldn't muster up any desire to celebrate his own exam passing.

"Um... hey," Kawamura spoke up casually with his finger holding the tab on a new can of beer. "Uh, wouldn't Kazuki have at least explained it? Why he sent back the ring, or uh... something..."

"....."

"Wataru? Hey man, are you okay? Aw, just drink up. C'mon, chug it!"

You don't have to talk if you don't want to. That was the implicit meaning in the plucky Kawamura's words as he offered over the open beer. Kawamura's blunt kindness gave Wataru an overwhelming urge to spill his guts on the spot, but he barely managed to hold it in.

I just don't know what to say...

If he opened his mouth now, all the anxiety and resentment would come brimming out and there would be no stopping it. If that happened, it wouldn't stop at simple complaining. Kawamura had stuck through his grumbling here at their passing ceremony, and Wataru wasn't about to put him through worse.

But, why?! Why would Kazuki... I just don't get it.

The ring had fallen out of a special delivery

airmail package.

Yuichi had said that it would run long if he sent an email so he had written an explanation of the circumstances in a letter, but Wataru knew that was just an excuse to return the ring. Why? Because the enclosed letter barely had a few lines, that's why. If he had called up and told Wataru over the phone that he was returning the ring, it probably wouldn't have bothered Wataru nearly so much; in fact, it might have even avoided this kind of development. After all, minor issues weren't worth dealing with over expensive and time-consuming international calls.

Kazuki...

Wataru thought back once more to the content of the letter that he had pondered dozens of times in the past three days.

“Wataru, sorry my return has been postponed. I'm sure you're worried, but I'll do everything I can to get back soon, so wait a little longer please. I'll entrust my ring to you until we're reunited. I'll keep in touch.”

No matter how many times he re-read it in his trembling hands, that was all that was written on the white stationery. Wataru had asked him to give some information on why his return was being postponed, but not a word about that was written, and perhaps that was a deliberate choice. The silver ring had been entrusted to him without asking, with feelings hard to accept, and this agitated Wataru greatly.

I'm the one who pushed him to go to New York. I didn't want him to have regrets, and I thought it wouldn't

do any damage to our relationship. But...

There was presently a woman named Mizuho at Yuichi's side. She was an older woman, eight years his senior, who had gone out with him very briefly before he started high school. She used to be his older brother's girlfriend, and he admired her greatly.

Mizuho had told him she missed him for the first time since they had separated. She was suffering from a serious heart disease and was to undergo surgery in New York. The surgery had a low chance of success, and she didn't want to leave with any regrets. However, Yuichi tried to turn down her request without even consulting with Wataru. His reason was that he had been afraid that his going to the U.S. would make Wataru anxious before his exams. But the two of them ultimately talked it out, and Yuichi ended up heading for New York on the condition that it would only be until the surgery was over.

Almost three weeks had passed since then. It was long past the time when Yuichi was initially scheduled to return, and he still made no indication that he would be coming back soon.

It's strange. Mizuho's surgery was even a success.

Having received the ring, Wataru of course tried to contact Yuichi right away. It was approaching 1 a.m. in New York but maybe he was still awake, barely. Bah, he'd talk to Yuichi even if it meant forcing him awake. He was fired up.

But...

"This phone has been turned off..."

The repeating robotic-sounding message just made Wataru despair. It was doubtful that he would be in the hospital at this hour, and this was the first time Yuichi had ever cut off his phone.

What the heck is the deal...?

The slowly smoldering bad premonition suddenly felt all too real.

Sure, Yuichi had once spent ten days cramming for a summer mock exam, and Wataru hadn't been able to get in touch with him then either. But the timing of this was too wrong. It was like a flashing neon sign saying not to call him. Yuichi must have predicted that Wataru would call once the ring reached him, and taken the initiative to avoid it. That was the only way Wataru could see it.

Kazuki... Why? Why...?

Wataru still wouldn't give up, though. He tried calling again, this time to the hotel where Yuichi was staying. But it just kept ringing with no indication of anyone coming to answer it. Maybe there weren't many people in the middle of the night, or the front desk was closed. He let the phone ring with its hollow tone and finally hung up at around the twentieth ring, then tried calling Yuichi's cell phone again. He couldn't get through, nor did he expect to, and as a last resort he had fired off an email to Yuichi reading, "Call me."

Today marked the third day since then.

Wataru had kept his cell phone on him at all times in case Yuichi called, but he received no phone calls or even a single email from his beloved partner.

Kawamura would interrupt his reflections with casual conversation.

"It's kinda weird to fall out of contact like that in the U.S. Maybe Kazuki's family has heard something? Surely his parents would know what's going on?"

"I haven't asked yet."

"Why not? If you're to the point of drinking yourself silly and getting all wound up, just give 'em a call already. Or, like... ask Shohei or something. You know his number, right?"

"....."

Of course Wataru had thought of that. But he had no idea how to broach the subject with Yuichi's parents. He had been introduced as Yuichi's underclassman when he'd gone to Yuichi's place to hang out before; he was nothing more to them.

Besides... would they tell me even if I asked?

The reason Yuichi didn't put any details in the letter must have been because Yuichi didn't want to tell Wataru that he couldn't come back. If that was the case, he certainly didn't expect Yuichi's relatives to tell much of the truth to some mere underclassman.

And Shohei would be even less likely to help!

Shohei was Yuichi's elder brother, and he knew full well about Wataru and Yuichi being an item. But he was firmly convinced that his beloved younger brother's lover was gay and must have led a shady lifestyle, and he was against their relationship. Considering all the schemes he'd tried to hatch, he would have no reason to tell Wataru anything.

"I tried calling the hotel a few times, but..."

"They always say he's out, huh? Well, he did go overseas to visit a sick person. Maybe it has something to do with her? Like, he could be spending days at a time there. That would explain his cell phone being off the whole time, wouldn't it? C'mon, Wataru. It's probably something like that."

At some point the canned beer had gotten warm. Wataru mechanically chugged it down his throat as the thought echoed in his chest, *But sending the ring back is still strange.*

"... I'll just wait a little longer and see. The letter did say to wait."

"Wataru..."

Wataru addressed himself more than Kawamura when he spoke. But he wasn't sure of how much longer he could wait.

A fast-speaking English announcement came over the hospital intercom. A black female nurse pushed a stretcher while shouting, "Clear the way!" A doctor of Chinese ancestry gave a brief explanation of treatment to a white male patient in the waiting room. There were a variety of races, languages and skin colors. It was an atmosphere to which he had grown accustomed over the course of his stay, and Yuichi observed how American hospitals, with their bustling and energetic atmosphere not unlike downtown, drastically differed from Japanese hospitals. He had been bewildered at hospital life, but Yuichi had gotten much better at listening to English as a result.

"Yuichi? Are you leaving the hospital?" A

Hispanic girl's voice called out to him from a hospital room as he walked down the hall. The girl peeking timidly through the cracked door was six years old, the same age as his niece Takako. When he approached and told her yes, a slightly sad smile rose to her dark-complexioned skin, and she told him congratulations. "It'll be more lonely here, but now you can go back to Japan, right? You've been worried about that this whole time, Yuichi."

"Yeah. I'm making someone important wait on me."

"You are? Well, good then!"

Yuichi nodded and extended his right hand, stroking the girl's tiny face gently. He had only known her a few days, but his little buddy had eased his heart greatly. In any case, he had been hit by a string of unexpected turns, enough to make him seriously wonder if he wasn't cursed in some way.

"Once I'm out of here, I'll send you a card from Japan. You hang in there too, Rachel."

"Yeah. Send me a picture of your important person, okay?"

"... Sure."

He exchanged promises with a smile as he added in his mind, *He's a guy. Don't be too surprised, now.* Wataru must have been worried about him after he fell out of contact. He was probably agitated day in and day out. Yuichi figured he would visit Mizuho's hospital room and offer a greeting, then head straight back to his hotel and send off an email.

I left pretty much everything back at the hotel. I

hope they're saving my room.

It was already the third day since he had been hospitalized, and he had been dragged around and subjected to enough examinations and treatments to make his head spin. After paying most of his hospital bills with plastic he didn't have enough cash on hand for a public phone. He couldn't borrow from Mizuho since she had relapsed into intensive care, either. The timing was bad all around.

Well, at least the silver lining is that I made it out in three days. Mizuho seems to be making a strong rally, too.

Her attending physician had just told him that she had been returned to the general ward, to which he breathed a sigh of relief from the bottom of his heart. If the worst had happened at this juncture, he would have been at a loss as to why he had even bothered coming to New York. The reason he had left Wataru right before his exam to cross the ocean alone had been because he earnestly wanted Mizuho's aid.

"Mizuho, I'm coming in."

He knocked and opened the door. Within the room, Mizuho smiled. Her complexion was still pale, and her eyes were dim, but she was out of danger now.

Yuichi quietly entered the room, heart aching at the sight of her thin arms dotted all over with IV marks.

"How's your condition? I got permission for discharge a little faster, so I'm stopping back by the hotel. I can buy something on the way if you want anything."

"It's fine... I don't need anything. Will you really be okay, though?"

"All I have are bruises and fractured finger bones. I was mostly hospitalized for examinations."

"... I'm sorry. It's because of me..."

The woman apologizing so pitifully had just been on the verge of death, and she was in terrible condition. But her beauty remained unabated, and her large black eyes gazed unblinking at his.

"Will you be able to manage the hospital bill? Over here, the fees rack up so much that some people leave the hospital before they're fully recovered. You got checked and nothing unusual came up, right?"

"Don't worry, I'm insured, so it'll work out. I'll handle the paperwork right away, so after that it'll be up to the insurance company guys to talk with the hospital. You don't have to worry about me, Mizuho, so just focus on your own recovery."

"But..."

"It's fine. You're the one who needs to recover soon. You just went through surgery."

It had been close to one week ago that Mizuho's stable condition post-surgery had suddenly changed.

When Yuichi got the emergency call telling him she'd suffered a secondary pneumonia infection as a post-surgery complication and that her condition had turned critical, he had dropped everything and rushed out of the hotel. Unfortunately, on the way there, the taxi he flagged down had gotten into a rear-end collision. Every second counted, and while Yuichi managed to get released from the scene by the police when he explained the situation to them, he failed to notice that he was injured in his haste to get there.

... Yeesh. What an idiot I am. Go to visit a patient and suddenly I'm a patient myself.

The impact from the rear-ending had hit his left side hard, but he hadn't felt the pain all over until hours after the accident. The pain worsened as he watched Mizuho's progress from a hospital hallway, until it became unbearable. He finally realized he was in bad shape and had the physician on duty check him out. The physician noted the blows to the shoulder and elbow, as well as the fractures to the middle and ring fingers on his left hand, and told Yuichi to get X-rays during the day and undergo a full examination.

"Say, Yuichi? You should have gone home long ago, right?"

"Eh?"

"I mean, you're injured and all, but still... You extended your stay because my condition worsened, didn't you? I appreciate the sentiment. You have someone at home waiting for you. Wouldn't it ease your wounds to see the face of your love even a little sooner?"

Mizuho looked at the brooding Yuichi and went right for the gut. After battling her illness for a long time, the lively impression she used to give had been replaced with shadow, but she still had a firm demeanor in spades when meeting someone's eyes.

Yuichi thought to himself that she was a beautiful woman.

Light, soft, short hair. A slender, fragile-looking neck. Large, black eyes that highlighted her expressions.

When he met her again for the first time in four

years, he'd felt a sense of nostalgia at her visage, mostly unchanged from what he remembered. She had fought a painful illness for years without ever giving up on living, and she remained kind above all else. He admired the woman at his brother's side and deeply treasured his memories of his time with her, even if that time had been fleeting.

And yet... It's strange...

Yuichi's heart remained calm in a way that surprised him. His heartbeat grew so agitated around Wataru, but here it was as calm as a surface of water undisturbed by wind. Shohei was right when he pointed out that Wataru and Mizuho did have a little in common. But those were just symbolic resemblances, their black eyes and unyielding spirits. As he spoke with her, no other likenesses came to mind.

—Wataru. You aren't like anyone else.

Shohei had purposely let that comparison slip, and Yuichi recalled it had made Wataru uneasy. Wataru had shown a nervous expression. The words Yuichi had whispered to him as he embraced Wataru in his arms came rushing to his chest. There was no need to verify that anew. To Yuichi, Wataru Fujii was one of a kind.

"Ha... Hahah."

"Yuichi?"

Mizuho's eyes widened at Yuichi's sudden laughter. Yuichi had kept a soft demeanor when visiting the hospital room, offering gentle encouragement while maintaining his star student image. That tension-free face laughing in defeat must have made him look like a different person.

"What is it? Did I say something odd?"

"... No, not at all, sorry. You just, uh... reminded me of something."

"Eh?"

He gazed at the confused woman with a hint of laughter still left. Back when they had gone out, he hadn't wanted Mizuho to consider him a child when she was eight years his senior, and he had never shown her his honest face. Smiling openly with feeling was something Yuichi had first learned to do with Wataru.

"Mizuho. I was iffy about coming to New York at first."

"....."

Of course Mizuho was aware of this. After all, Yuichi had turned her down at first. She had a baffled look like she was wondering what he hoped to accomplish by bringing this up now. Yuichi continued speaking with a very happy expression.

"But now I'm glad I came. If Wataru hadn't pushed me into going, I would have never realized just how special of a partner he was. I considered him important before now, but the impatience that can't easily convey feelings in words or kisses has shown me that my feelings are the real deal. Thank you for that."

"Yuichi..."

"I'll go home soon like you ask, Mizuho. Will you be okay all by yourself?"

"Come on, don't disappoint me. I'm not alone. I've got friends," Mizuho responded with a smile and a light chuckle. She had been a single child in a motherless family and lost her father years ago, and she had led a

solitary life since. She had enough inheritance that this didn't adversely affect her life, but even excluding the issue of being hospitalized in a foreign country, she had no close relatives looking after her. However, she seemed to make a lot of friends easily, as Yuichi had been introduced to several guests visiting her. They included hospital nurses and former patients who had been discharged.

"Still, your coming here for me made me the happiest of all. Thank you for listening to my selfish request. I really mean it. I bet that's what let me bear that rough surgery. I'm sure I made your lover as lonely as I've been happy, but... Yuichi, you and Wataru have saved my life. I'll never forget it as long as I live. You'll always have my gratitude." Mizuho continued speaking as her eyes grew misty with tears. "You've grown lovelier by far than when I knew you. I was shocked when I heard you were seeing a boy, but the more I learn of you now, the more I can see that it's a great romance. I wonder what kind of magic Wataru used to change you when you played the part of the perfect student under Shohei's shadow."

"It's not really magic." Yuichi lowered his gaze to his bandaged ring finger and murmured softly with pride, "He accepts me the way I am. And not just that. He always speaks from his heart... all the time. It's easy to say you trust someone, but I doubt anyone but the person doing it knows just how hard it is to actually do that. But Wataru does it like it comes naturally."

"....."

"The reason he told me to go to New York when

I was unsure was because he felt strongly for me. That's the kind of lover I have. Of course I'd be invincible. Right, Mizuho?"

Maybe that was too sappy for Mizuho. She was briefly at a loss for words. But her eyes creased fondly in a way that said, *I'm jealous*.

Yes, he was invincible. Yuichi said it to himself anew, having removed the ring.

"No! You can't cut that!"

The ring wouldn't budge from his swelling finger. This made treatment unfeasible, so the doctor instructed a nurse to cut the ring off. Yuichi grew defensive upon hearing that and desperately resisted. No matter what pain would come of it, he wouldn't lose the ring that way.

"Please! I'll bear any pain it takes, so don't cut that ring!"

"Are you stupid? Which is more important, that ring or your body?"

The doctor rejected his pleas in a tone that brooked no argument, but Yuichi wouldn't back down. He gave the nurse holding the tools a piercing glare, a wordless warning to back off.

"It's an irreplaceable item. I can't just compare which one is more valuable."

"Nonsense. Your finger could be crooked for the rest of your life."

"I'll be fine. This is my good luck charm."

Yuichi refused to budge, and the doctor finally gave up in exasperation. After being told to do whatever

he wanted, the ring did eventually come off after some time, but Yuichi endured through terrible pain the likes of which he had never experienced. He was dead set on protecting that ring while he was apart from Wataru.

"You've floored me. I want you to stay in the hospital and get re-examined first thing in the morning. Okay?"

Okay, Yuichi had answered obediently while silently fuming against the doctor's words. He needed to get back to his hotel so he could do something he wanted to do. Mizuho's condition was fluctuating, and he needed to get some changes of clothes and come back as well.

What I wanted to do... That was...

Yuichi moved to act on one thought as he looked at his ring finger, which was throbbing in pain.

That thought was to entrust the removed ring with Wataru.

I probably won't head back right away. I could be here a while with Mizuho in her condition, and I won't be able to fit the ring on an injured ring finger while I'm here.

His prospects for returning were growing dimmer, and he had been forced to remove the ring in an unfortunate accident. He couldn't get these two facts out of his head. It was like the ring wanted to go home.

Back then, I considered it in a way that was out of character for me. That I should at least send the ring back to meet my partner ahead of me. I felt like if I did, I could come back sooner myself.

Yuichi sent the ring by express mail with

feelings akin to a prayer. Surely Wataru would be sad that he couldn't come back. But as long as Wataru had that ring, Yuichi would be sure to return to him. No matter what happened, their rings had always returned to their rightful places. Even apart, there was no doubt that they had the power to draw fate in.

Looking back now, I was so weakhearted...

Yuichi could say that now that he had regained his calmness, but at the time he had been completely serious about it. Fear that Mizuho might die. Pain from wounds in an accident on foreign soil. He had taken it all as bad hints and felt the urgent need to do something.

He had sealed the terse letter and decided to explain the details over the phone after he was released from examinations. Even Wataru would be taken off-guard having a ring returned to him out of the blue. He wanted to explain it fully, but bad news kept coming and he grew a little reluctant. He knew that even without this, Wataru was forcing himself to act cheerful. Yuichi wanted time to consider how to talk about it.

I didn't expect to get stalled for so long in the hospital.

Yuichi returned for more examinations after going to the post office and was told to stay in the hospital. They had found several bruised areas other than his fingers, and the doctor had concluded that they should check his brainwaves and internal organs as well. He was only able to get back to the hotel three days later, and he hurriedly phoned Wataru when he got there to at least let him know that his return had been postponed.

"Eh...? What do you mean...?"

Wataru's voice fell just as expected. He had finally gotten in touch only to be told Yuichi wasn't coming back. Of course he was taken aback, and Yuichi's heart ached too. Yuichi was reluctant to deliver more blows by mentioning his having been in an accident or Mizuho's as-of-yet critical condition, and he ended the conversation when it was barely half finished.

The ring should've gotten there by now. I should have explained everything...

He had put on a stupid display, even if it had only been for a moment.

If he was going to return the ring, he should have explained why. He didn't want to make Wataru wonder if he had lost his nerve. He had fooled himself into thinking he could fix everything later by phone, and when he went back to visit Mizuho, he collapsed from a headache. The doctor had feared it was an aftereffect of the accident, and Yuichi was made to stay in the hospital for another three days, but careful re-examinations over those days showed no abnormalities. It was apparently true that the body screamed when tense for so long. Thinking back, he hadn't gotten much sleep since Mizuho had gone into the intensive care unit.

I'm so pathetic. I should have told him everything when I called to tell him I was postponing my return. Then I wouldn't be putting Wataru through so much stress.

It was too late for regrets, but Yuichi still gnashed his teeth at the awful timing. Wataru must have been agitated with no idea what was going on after receiving the ring while Yuichi was stuck in the hospital. Yuichi

had told him that he loved him, that he would definitely come back, so he doubted Wataru would take it in a bad way; but he would certainly be worried about just what was going on.

I need to get back soon and put his mind at ease. Mizuho's gotten stable, too.

He was relieved from the bottom of his heart. Now he could go back to Japan with no regrets. The string of unexpected problems had stressed him physically and mentally, but as long as it was over and done with, he would be fine.

"Mizuho, how are you holding up? It looks like your friend's getting discharged a little ahead of you."

The door opened with a light knock, and Mizuho's white-clad attending physician entered the room. He was a Japanese-American named Jake. When introducing himself, he had described himself as someone who looked Japanese but unfortunately only spoke English.

"Really, getting into an accident on your way to visit a sick person? Yuichi, you've got all the luck."

"But thanks to you, I'm discharged today. I'll be heading back home shortly, Doc. Make sure to keep taking good care of her."

"Certainly. I'll get Mizuho in good health, whatever it takes."

Jake worked with a bighearted attitude and seemed to care for Mizuho. He was close to her in age, and Yuichi was familiar with his pleasant demeanor. He hoped it would go well for them.

"Yuichi, let me know when you're sure what

your departure date is. I won't be able to see you off, but at least say something to me before you go?"

"I know. For today, I'm just going straight back to the hotel. I've been out of contact for three days, so I'm sure Wataru must be getting worried by now. I'll have to do something to cheer him up."

Yuichi gave Jake a light nod and left the hospital room the same way he had come in, with a casual stroll. All he wanted right now was to hear Wataru's voice. He had had that on his mind the whole time.

Now I can finally get back. I'm really sorry to keep you waiting, Wataru.

The pleasant spring breeze gave Yuichi a feeling of liberation. He walked at a fast gait straight for the subway station.

But he still didn't realize.

The slightest difference in timing would spell a major turnaround for them in the days to come.

After drinking the night away and passing out in a drunken stupor at Kawamura's house, Wataru returned home the next day nursing a pounding hangover.

"Ugh, Wataru, you smell like beer breath! Stay back a little."

"Karin... Come on, this is what I get when you see me?" Wataru responded in objection to his younger sister, whose brows were furrowed in obvious distaste, as he drew some bottled mineral water from the refrigerator. But he knew better than anyone that complaining would do no good. The people around him on the train home had all given him cold looks. Once he

gulped down the water with a melancholy air about him, Karin spoke up again in exasperation.

“Wataru, you’ve been acting weird lately.”

“Weird? Me?”

“Kinda... emotionally unstable, I guess. You’re even carrying your cell phone with you when you take baths.”

“G... Get real.”

Wataru’s tone was rough as his face grew flustered, but there was no energy to his protest. He slumped in defeat at his lack of brotherly dignity. Karin leaned against a pillar and gave him a sympathetic look as she offered understanding words.

“You must have it rough, Wataru. Kazuki’s still in America, right? He was scheduled to come back ages ago.”

“Well... yeah...”

“Don’t tell me you’re worried that he won’t make it back in time for your graduation?”

“.....”

Right now Wataru and the rest of his third year class were in free attendance, but there were only two weeks left until the mid-March graduation ceremony. He didn’t want to consider that Yuichi’s return might be postponed back that far, but the way things were right now, he couldn’t predict anything that might happen.

“Ah, well, um... No way! No way that could happen!”

Karin spoke hastily after seeing her brother’s mood plunging and thinking, *Uh-oh*. She knew how close they were, so she must have been teasing. Wataru

would usually snap out a quick retort, but this time he just fell silent with a sinking expression.

"Hey, uh... Oh, right. Wataru, we got a call from a realtor recently."

"A realtor?"

"Yeah. You previewed a rental house with Kazuki before, right? They were asking if they could get a reply sometime soon. It's a popular place so they seem to be in a hurry."

"....."

Come to think of it, yes, they had previewed that house. Wataru had forgotten all about it in the shock over the ring. Just from the unreasonable way his partner pushed it, he could tell his partner had grown impatient too.

Kazuki told me to go ahead with the contract if I liked it, but... Still...

Was that really for the best?

Wataru was gripped by anxiety, and crushing doubts were gnawing at his heart. Yuichi had spoken of living together on the phone like it was natural, but what was Wataru supposed to do to proceed with this while Yuichi himself wasn't present?

No, that's not it. I hadn't considered it that way before. I just trusted in Kazuki and wanted to do whatever I could. If I close the contract before he gets back and prepare a welcome for him there, wouldn't that be showing enthusiasm instead?

And yet, strangely for him, he just couldn't muster the energy. It was as though the return of the ring with no explanation had paralyzed part of his emotions,

far beyond the postponed return.

I...

He could hardly say that his time going out with Yuichi had been smooth sailing.

Shohei's declaration of turning against him. The confession to Wataru from Masanobu Asaka, an upperclassman of Yuichi's. All kinds of troubles had shaken both of their hearts, and they'd had their fair share of quarrels at times. But whenever that happened, they had gone back to the source of their romance and overcome their struggles with deeper feelings than before. Wataru was proud of that, and his feelings for Yuichi never cooled, not even now. But so much had happened in such a short time, his heart was worn thin.

"Wataru? Are you really okay?"

"Huh...?"

Snapping out of it, Wataru found Karin standing right in front of him, peering up at his face from below. She didn't seem to be playing around this time. She was really worried. Wataru hurriedly forced a smile and patted her head.

"Geez, what's with the somber face? I've been drunk for two days. I'm just a little out of it still."

"But..."

"Don't worry about me. I'm going to get a shower. As for you, shouldn't you go out somewhere on a Sunday? Don't you have anyone to go on a date with?"

"Mind your own business."

Karin delivered her retort with her tongue stuck out, in a huff over Wataru's ribbing. She started to head off to the kitchen, then paused like she remembered

something and glanced back over her shoulder at him.

"I know. Go out with me for a little while, Wataru."

"What?"

"We haven't been out together in a while. Why not join me after clearing your head in the shower? The upperclassmen in the tennis club put me in charge of choosing graduation presents. If you're just going to mope around the house, come with me and offer some advice."

"Go shopping with you?" Wataru responded skeptically, to which Karin nodded enthusiastically as though it had already been decided. Wataru frankly didn't like the idea of going out, but as Karin had pointed out, he had had enough of moping around the house and staring at a phone that never rang. It might be nice to get some fresh air in town.

Fine, he told her, and Karin's expression perked up. She must have wanted to cheer him out of his depression. *You've got to snap out of it*, he told himself as he headed for the bathroom. He checked for incoming messages while taking off his clothes, fully knowing it was useless to do so, and indeed, nothing had come.

"Wataru, I'm getting tired. Want to get tea somewhere?"

"You've barely looked at any gifts yet."

"Well, these new shoes are cute and all, but they're so hard to wear."

Wataru sighed helplessly at Karin's completely unapologetic attitude. Publicly they might have looked

like a smiling couple, but his sister, less than a year younger than he, was a real pain. She was pushy and never treated him like an older brother, but when it counted she'd suddenly start acting like a younger sister. He gave up protesting and looked around, then pressed onward toward the retail building in front of them. He figured that building would have a few decent cafes.

Come to think of it, I wonder how the coffee shop owner and his wife are doing. I've been busy and haven't been by lately.

It was a coffee shop that he and Yuichi frequented. It had a classic decor that defied the mere word "cafe," and its atmosphere made it the perfect place to relax. He hadn't set foot in there since he began studying in earnest, but now he could go without any worries.

Once Kazuki gets back, I'll go there with him and report my passing. The missus likes Kazuki, and I won't be able to come by much once I start college.

He prayed to be able to get in touch even a day sooner, for that purpose.

After murmuring this prayer softly to himself, his thoughts drifted to Masanobu. He had first met Masanobu when he was going to the cafe with Yuichi. He'd gotten Masanobu to act as a special tutor over summer break. His gentle voice correcting Wataru's mistakes rang in Wataru's ears with a feel of nostalgia even now.

But... I won't see him again, will I...

Wataru was sure that Masanobu would be too proud to admit any injury, since Wataru had ended it. But thinking about Masanobu made an irrecoverable

injury to Wataru's own heart throb in pain. It hurt him to think that his time together with Masanobu, a man who confessed to him yet asked nothing in return, had been taking advantage of Masanobu's kindness.

"Wataru? What's wrong, you look spaced out. Look, we're here. Which floor are we going to?"

"Oh yeah, sorry. Pick whatever cafe you want, whatever floor you want," Wataru responded halfheartedly as he wondered how Masanobu was doing these days.

Masanobu Asaka. He was Yuichi's supperclassman and three years his senior. He had attractive good looks and a coolheaded demeanor. He was a far greater man than Yuichi, akin to an ideal prince that came out of a painting. But in reality, he pined after his deceased lover and lived with that loneliness. His love toward Wataru was what let him escape that.

"You're a guy, so I never expected this feeling to be love. But I think... From the time I first saw you in this cafe with Kazuki, I've loved you, Wataru."

That was it. That coffee shop was also the place where Masanobu opened up and shared his feelings. Wataru had known that Masanobu being there caused tension between himself and Yuichi, and that it endangered their relationship, but even so he couldn't bear to refuse that sincere gaze. He had finally told Masanobu a few days ago that he couldn't see him anymore, and it was doubtful he would ever be able to fully erase Masanobu's crestfallen look from his mind.

I mean, I cared for Asaka. It was completely different from my feelings for Kazuki, of course. It was

strangely soothing being with him. It wasn't love. It was more like wanting to go out with him as a person... I guess that was how I viewed it.

But as far as Masanobu was concerned, that was just cruel treatment. Once Wataru figured that out, he was left with no choice but to stop seeing him entirely.

"Hey, you're Wataru Fujii!"

"Huh?"

"What the hell are you doing standing around staring into space?"

A familiar voice blurted out in bewilderment and snapped Wataru out of his thoughtful reverie standing in front of the floor directory. It was Masanobu's younger brother Masaaki, who was going to college in America. He had moved to New York with his parents who had gotten job assignments overseas, and presently he had returned to Japan on school break. On top of everything else he had a major brother complex, and he had been eager to bring Masanobu back with him, since Masanobu was the only family member left still living in Japan.

I guess now that Asaka's decided to study abroad, he'll get his wish.

Masaaki had Masanobu's good looks with a rougher air about him and slightly young, wild features. He had looked upon Wataru as an enemy from the very start, but in the few days since Wataru had broken it off with Masanobu, he seemed to have eased off on pointless attacks. One likely reason for that was that they had a shared enemy in the form of Shohei Kazuki and this formed a strange sense of solidarity between them. Frankly speaking, he wasn't all that bad of a guy.

“Sup, Wataru? Shopping around by yourself? You must be a lonely guy.”

“Oh look, it’s the scary person who came to see Wataru.”

“Ah...”

Masaaki started off with his typical verbal jabbing, but when he noticed Karin behind Wataru, his expression changed. The fearless girl had big black eyes just like Wataru’s that gazed patiently upon Masaaki. Despite being afraid of him before, she was immune to that fear now.

“Hi. I’m Karin, Wataru’s sister.”

“H... Hi there.”

Masaaki bowed his head in a surprisingly polite manner to Karin. Wataru was disappointed that he had a weakness for girls, and asked him what he was doing there in turn.

“Aren’t you going back to New York soon? Do you have time to be goofing around like this?”

“Leave me alone, mind your own business. Masanobu says there’s a book he wants. You’ve been in the big bookstore in the basement here, right?”

“So, does that mean...”

“Ah...”

Wataru heard someone come to a stop right next to them. It couldn’t be... Wataru’s heart jumped and pounded rapidly. He couldn’t muster the courage to shift his line of sight, but he couldn’t help but recognize the voice that had just now spoken.

Asaka...

It had barely been three days since Wataru had

decided not to see him again. God must be pretty spiteful to have them run into each other again so suddenly.

“Wataru...?”

Karin knew nothing of this and looked at Wataru in confusion as his expression stiffened and froze in place. An awkward atmosphere filled the air, and even the audacious Masaaki made a face like he had no idea what to say. But the one made the most awkward by this was certainly Masanobu. Wataru thought to himself that he shouldn't cause any more trouble for him.

“Hey, I, uh...”

Wataru wondered what expression Masanobu's face held as he looked at Wataru.

Imagining it dampened his spirits further, and he figured he should just get away from this and fast, while Masanobu still hadn't said anything. If he heard Masanobu's voice, he'd start regretting the treatment he'd given Masanobu.

“Sorry, but we're in a bit of a hurry. Come on, Karin, we're going!”

“Huh? Hey, hold on!”

He grabbed his sister's hand and quickly started out of the area with his head kept low. But in the next moment, a critical fact flitted through his head.

Oh yeah, the ring...

When he had given his final talk to Masanobu, Wataru had dropped the ring that was the counterpart to Yuichi's, and Masanobu had picked it up. But Wataru had run away before getting it back, and while it had bothered him, he had just left it with Masanobu.

I should ask for it back now. But...

What would he do if Masanobu said he wouldn't give it back?

Back then, Masanobu had said that after picking the ring up off the asphalt and closing his hand over it. When Wataru wondered how earnest he was when he'd said that, he found the matter hard to bring up.

But I can't let it keep going like this. That's a special ring, and this is all on top of Kazuki's weird situation.

Fine, Wataru decided. He wasn't going to change his relationship with Masanobu now by being considerate. If that was the case, he might as well give in to his ego until he felt better.

"Excuse me, Asaka. Um, about that ring from earlier..."

"He's already gone to the bookstore."

"Huh?"

When Wataru finally turned around and mustered up the courage to speak, Masaaki responded to him with a deadpan face. He was right, the presence Wataru had felt of Masanobu was no longer there.

"Aw, man... Asaka..."

"What are you getting so shocked over after ignoring my brother and trying to walk out on him?"

"No, I mean, that wasn't..."

"Don't give me that. You've broken things off with him. Don't go waiting to see what he does and then play off of that."

"....."

Masaaki's opinion was entirely reasonable, but Wataru had his own reasons too. He had to get that ring

back, whatever else happened.

“Hey, watch your mouth. Quit talking to Wataru like he’s some evil spirit.”

“E-Evil spirit?”

“I don’t know what your problem is, but Wataru never deceives anybody. Wataru only cares about Kazuki. No other man means anything to him. Isn’t that right, Wataru?”

“K-Karin...”

Karin’s overbearing spirit left not just Masaaki speechless, but Wataru as well. He was grateful to her for covering for him, but asserting something like that out loud in the middle of town? He’d never be able to walk the streets again.

“Evil spirit, she says...” Masaaki muttered to himself, shoulders shaking. Wataru wanted to kick him from behind and yell at him to stop repeating himself, but he couldn’t afford to draw any more attention with a bigger scene. Meanwhile, Masaaki stooped over and giggled like he couldn’t hold it in any longer, and it quickly turned into riotous laughter.

“What? What’s so funny?!”

“Come on... This guy, an evil spirit? This harmless, slack-jawed fool couldn’t be an evil spirit even if he tried.”

“You were just telling him not to deceive your brother!”

“Yeah, I said that, but... Aw, forget it. My stomach hurts now!”

All of that laughter was making a mockery of her anger. Karin gave Masaaki a glare, grabbed Wataru’s

arm, and dragged him off.

"Let's go, Wataru! This guy stinks. I hate him!"

"Eh...?"

Masaaki's laughter abruptly ceased at that vehement parting shot. But Karin stormed off without looking back. Wataru stumbled along after her, being pulled in her wake, and a voice called out after them.

"Wait! Hey, hold on, wait up!"

"Don't stop, Wataru. Jerks like that should just be ignored."

"But I think you might have really hurt his feelings saying you hate him like that."

"Who gives a flip?"

She kept walking without slowing her pace, and her words left no room for argument. As they left, Wataru caught a glimpse of Masaaki watching them go with a more crestfallen expression than Wataru had ever seen on him.

"Oh? You've decided?"

He'd guessed since seeing the face of the one waiting for him at the coffee shop to which he had been asked to come. Those were the first words out of Shohei Kazuki's mouth. He then took a seat with a huff and ordered an espresso. This was the coffee shop that his younger brother Yuichi frequented to meet up with his lover, the "black-eyed brat," and for all of its subdued and old-fashioned decor, the coffee they made here was delicious.

"... Ugh, I'm in the middle of work, you know. If I don't get these blueprint corrections done by tomorrow

and get them into the construction work immediately, it'll be too late. Without a capable assistant, my office has been struggling with its workload. Try to show a little responsibility."

"Shohei, didn't your Sette d'Oro group work on its own before I worked there part-time?"

"Yeah, well, when I remember how nice it was for us for a while, it's kind of hard to go back, you know?"

Shohei faced Masanobu, the young man drinking a coffee blend before him, and gave an exaggerated sigh. Shohei was turning thirty-two this year, and he had founded and was currently heading a first-rate up-and-coming architecture firm with six others. Masanobu had met him through the activities of their circles and had taken up work as an assistant for him, but he had turned down their tentative job offer to study abroad in America. Of course Shohei was not amused, and he had tried several schemes to stop him.

But that was reaching the end of its time limit as well. Masanobu was firm in his decision, and the king-like Shohei who had never once given in to his desires had even started considering leaving it alone.

"Thank you, Shohei."

"Eh?"

Shohei was taken aback at the abrupt expression of gratitude. Masanobu put down his coffee cup and looked right back at Shohei with a peaceful smile akin to still waters.

"You ordered an espresso because you don't intend to stay for long, right? That means you've finally

decided to permit my selfishness.”

“.....”

“Am I wrong?”

Masanobu's confident gaze left Shohei unusually bewildered. He had been somewhat prepared, but Masanobu showed no sign of weakness today. He hadn't sounded very cheerful when he had called Shohei's cell phone while Shohei had been in transit, but Masanobu had apparently managed to compose his feelings while he was waiting. He was quiet, but his whole form was filled with vigor.

Well, he's probably involved with that black-eyed brat again. He's hopeless.

Three days before, Masanobu had broken it off decisively with Wataru Fujii, the aforementioned “black-eyed brat.” He had declared that he wouldn't meet Wataru again, and he had severed all ties. The loss that he must have felt from it must have stung, just from how much he had made himself part of Wataru's life, regardless of the fact that it was a love he had never initially desired.

How ironic... The more you love, the faster you part ways.

Of course, Shohei had some idea of it from start to finish. And Masanobu was probably aware that Shohei knew. But seeing Masanobu shedding tears and unable to compose himself, Shohei found himself filled with uncharacteristic complex thoughts. He was normally a man to do things rationally, and he wouldn't hesitate to hatch schemes to get the result he wanted, but at that point and that point alone he had been at a loss for words. It was an important moment for one who would

do anything to interfere in Yuichi and Wataru's dating, but Shohei simply couldn't get used to such feelings.

So in the end, someone other than Yuichi lost something that way.

Masanobu's love for Wataru. Wataru's yearning for Yuichi.

And the valuable man of talent that Shohei intended to nurture and make his right hand man.

"... So, when's your departure?"

Shohei drew out his favorite brand of cigarettes from the jacket of his high-class suit and put one in his mouth. "You've been preparing for a while. You could be leaving as soon as tomorrow, huh?"

"Yes, well... For the moment, I'll be staying in New York for two weeks and tour some places to study abroad. I still have some lingering issues with arrangements and settling affairs in Japan, so I won't be gone that long."

"Settling affairs... Ah, the renovation club. It's that time of year when it cycles through members, and I bet the circle members are in an uproar. You made that club, after all. Do you have anyone to take over after you leave?"

"That's the issue right there."

Masanobu founded and acted as the representative of a circle called the Renovation Research Society. "Renovation" in this case referred to work with old houses and closed stores to reform them or repurpose them, and it involved total coordination of the interior from planning to design. The club had around thirty members total including boys and girls,

and Shohei had aided them with many of the materials they handled under the pretense of hands-on training. Yuichi intended to enter the architecture industry in the future, and he had recently finally joined as an official associate.

“Here’s your espresso, thanks for waiting.”

As Shohei took a drag from his cigarette and slowly breathed it out, the elderly proprietor brought out his espresso. Masanobu, a store regular, exchanged a few words of small talk with him. Shohei watched the unchanging ritual and remarked to himself how dull it was.

Masanobu knows that Yuichi postponed his return, yet he still decided to go to America. There’s no talking him out of this now. I guess there’s no point in staying in Japan if he can’t see Wataru anyway. When you fall for someone bad enough, all that awaits you is loneliness. Time to get out for a while, huh...

Shohei understood this well enough. That was why he wanted Masanobu to wait for the right time, but looking at it from the standpoint of reason, he had never stood a chance of winning Wataru over.

Regardless of being taken by surprise, the reason that black-eyed brat allowed him two kisses was because that was how serious Masanobu was about it. His earnest passion spread to his partner. But that brat must have had some guts of his own not to let it go any further.

No, Shohei corrected himself.

That by itself wouldn’t explain the complete and total rejection that boy had delivered to Masanobu when

they last spoke.

"Don't call me or email me again. It's a bother for me."

Those words of breakup left no room for hope, and were likely delivered in consideration of Masanobu himself. But there had to have been an ulterior, more selfish reason for going that far.

In a word?

It was because Wataru's feelings for Yuichi were strong enough to excel beyond Masanobu's passion.

"Shohei? Are you listening?"

"Hm?"

"... You must really be busy to space out like that. I hope you'll keep supporting the renovation club when I'm gone. Everyone's improved in their skills and design sense with the hands-on experience you've given them, and they're growing pretty handy. Kazuki's giving it his all, too."

"Yuichi, huh. He's always been a diligent type. He learns quick and works hard, so he catches up to others in no time flat."

Masanobu nodded with a smile at Shohei's typical pride in his younger brother, then moved to speak again.

"With him there, I can feel safe when I leave the club. Once April rolls around, new plans will come up, and they'll have to keep substantiating their activities. Kazuki doesn't care to take up leadership roles the way you do, but people gather around him naturally. I think it's about time he gave up denying it."

"In other words, Yuichi is your replacement?"

"I don't have time to persuade him to do it, but it'll end up that way even if I leave it alone. With that being the case, I've got no worries about the club. More importantly..."

Masanobu's face grew suddenly guarded, a faint shadow falling across it. It seemed that they had reached the real matter at hand. It's about time, Shohei thought to himself, but his expression remained carefully absorbed in the taste of his cigarette.

"Shohei, were you aware of the matching rings that Kazuki and Wataru share?"

"Yeah. I saw them wearing them when I first saw them in Okinawa. What about it?"

"I... actually have Wataru's ring, right now. I was hoping I could ask you to return it to him."

"Me?"

Shohei almost cracked up laughing at Masanobu's choice of person for this. He was opposed to their dating and had even issued a declaration of war to Wataru that he would become Wataru's enemy. How could he be expected to simply return the ring?

But Masanobu seemed serious. He leaned onto the table and continued speaking with a brooding look.

"I ask this of you. I couldn't possibly return it myself. I meant to have Masaaki do it, but he seems like he'd add some unnecessary commentary."

"Masaaki? Ah, your younger brother, the wild one. Is he close to Wataru?"

"It actually seems that way, yes," Masanobu responded to the unexpectedly concerned inquiry. "When I wouldn't go to America because I had Wataru,

Masaaki viewed him as an enemy. But thanks to an unnecessary scheme someone hatched, the two of them hit it off with each other instead."

"....."

"Shohei, things don't always go the way you anticipate."

Shohei hated to admit it, but if it was true, that was an interesting development. He had meant to make a move that would agitate Masaaki, yet he had ended up offering a helping, friendly hand.

"Hm. Well, it makes sense considering they have plenty in common as two straightforward types."

"It's not like you to indulge in sour grapes, Shohei. Are you just bad at handling children? Even when trying to keep them dancing in the palm of your hand, they start acting outside of your expectations. This must be what they mean when they say that they grow up fast these days."

"Don't talk like a withered old man. You're still plenty young, aren't you?"

"... I suppose I am." Masanobu smiled lightly in spite of Shohei's sharp words. "I never expected to cry in front of someone at this age either."

"Masanobu..."

"Asking you to forget about it would be too much, wouldn't it? It's you, after all."

Masanobu smiled once more, and he took a small breath and leveled a clear gaze across to Shohei. His eyes lacked any trace of pretense or bluff. It was Shohei's first time seeing the prideful Masanobu so humble in all the years he'd known him.

"I should confess, Shohei. I feared that you would use my tears in some underhanded ploy. After all, you do whatever it takes to reach your goals."

"I sure do."

"If I had beaten the odds and gotten through to Wataru, I wouldn't be chatting so calmly with you right now." Masanobu's tone grew sharp as he hammered each word home. "I don't care how much I get put to shame. Wataru has already been injured enough on my behalf. There's no telling how much it troubled him and pained him when I confessed my love to him. If someone tried to rub salt in his wounds on top of what he's already been through, I wouldn't forgive them. Not even if it was you."

"....."

"I'm serious, you know."

Masanobu had clearly changed from before. There was no more sign of the young man who pined for his lost love. Shohei had assumed that in his three days being out of contact that Masanobu was lost in grief, but now he had a newfound interest in Masanobu's unexpected strength.

"Just recently, I happened across Wataru in town."

"Eh?"

"I bolted, though. I guess that's the natural response right after saying we wouldn't meet again. But that gave me the confidence that I still live on inside of him. That alone is enough to satisfy me."

Ah, so that's what this was.

The sudden calling out and the lonely voice over

the phone had been because it was right after he had seen Wataru. Shohei gave a forced smile now that he understood the situation and thought to himself, *He's always unrequited.*

"If Wataru knew I was depressed, I'm sure he'd blame himself. I don't want to make things hard on him ever again. You see, Shohei? All I can express to Wataru now is that I'm strong."

"Masanobu..."

"So I'm going to New York with a smile. My departure has been scheduled for next weekend. I'll stay through mid-March, then return to Japan once." Saying this, Masanobu drew out a plain envelope from the messenger bag he had set down at his side. There was no need to guess what was inside. It was clearly holding the ring.

"I ask this of you. Could you give this to Wataru? I'm sure it has him in a bind."

"You stab a nail into me, then throw in 'Please' on top? You've been honing your skill as a strategist."

"There's no one else I can ask. I considered mailing it, but he might have a hard time accepting it directly from me. Wataru's quite sensitive, you know."

"And you can't find anyone more appropriate to entrust this to than me?"

"Eh?"

Shohei put out his cigarette in an ashtray and recomposed himself with a look of magnanimity.

"I mean Yuichi. His return to Japan has been delayed as you're aware. I haven't even heard from him in these past few days for some reason. He told

me Mizuho's condition had grown critical, and he told me not to tell the black-eyed brat, but something should have happened by now. If all goes well, he should get back before your flight."

"B... But..."

"Even if he doesn't get back, your destination is New York. You could meet him there and hand it over. You reap what you sow, and Yuichi's the only one not part of this. I hate to say it, but could you bring him in on it? Yuichi and Wataru should be the ones to decide what to do with those rings. How about it? Isn't that the most reasonable way to resolve this?"

Masanobu was hesitant to respond to the inconceivable proposal to meet with Yuichi, and understandably so. Coming from Shohei, who was already opposed to the two going out, there had to be a flip side. Shohei expected him to consider it that way, though, and he continued without waiting for a response.

"I think right now is a critical moment for them."

"Eh?"

"I'd certainly be satisfied if they separated. I've been working toward that all this time, after all. But in love, the key is the way the separation happens."

"The way the separation happens? Shohei, is that what you're after?"

"Wataru will never forget you for as long as he lives. I'll bet whatever you care to name on that. Nothing short of death would let him forget your recent kiss."

Masanobu had maintained his calm up until that

point, but at that remark, agitation became apparent in his eyes. Shohei wouldn't have known, but Masanobu would never let that second kiss fade. The summer day in which he had made that secret vow had given his heart new life.

"Having lost Yuina yourself, you should know that love hurts when it isn't ended cleanly. No matter how many stunts I try to pull, if it doesn't end the right way, then there won't be any net gain in them separating. I'd like to ascertain for myself what kind of conclusion the two of them reach around the rings."

"Ascertain...?"

"I grow tired of the tricks. Let the rest depend on how they act."

Shohei slowly rose with the bill in hand and leaned his face in toward Masanobu.

"When he receives Wataru's ring from you, what will Yuichi do first? Will he hit you? Will he lash out at Wataru? Or will he blame himself?"

"....."

"Leaving Wataru behind to go to New York was a serious decision for him. Yuichi doesn't realize that. It's not the same as a typical overseas trip. Am I right?"

Shohei smiled at Masanobu, close enough to feel the other's breath. Masanobu's complexion shifted color. Satisfied at the wary coloring on Masanobu's serene, pretty features, Shohei finally backed off.

This would be his final trap.

Now then.

Would his dear younger brother be able to successfully avoid it and grasp his lover's hand?

Wataru's eyes snapped open the moment he heard the notification sound of a new email arriving. His cell phone lay at the side of his pillow where it had been placed with great care, and it gave off a blinking green light in the darkness.

"Kazuki..." Wataru blurted out reflexively as he quickly rose out of bed. He hurriedly fumbled the clamshell cell phone model open, and there it was, the proof that this wasn't a dream: the name Yuichi Kazuki was clearly displayed.

The time on his watch read 4 a.m. He quickly calculated the time difference to himself and surmised that it was 2 p.m. in New York. That meant that once he read the email, he could possibly get in touch with him this time.

"What's the big idea now? It's already been days."

Wataru felt embarrassed at his own eagerness and made a show of grumbling to himself. He picked up Yuichi's ring from his desk after climbing out of bed, clenched the ring in his palm, and prayed upon it to please not let the email's contents be bad.

"Kazuki..."

He pushed down his faint anxiety and opened the email. Yuichi wasn't usually the type to send long emails anyway, but even so it was rather terse for him having kept Wataru waiting for three days.

"I'm sorry for not answering all the times you tried to contact me. I don't mind the time, so please reply as soon as you get this. Once I hear back, I'll call you."

"Eh...? This... This is it?"

Wataru re-read the email several times with a feeling of disappointment. He was still dismayed over what might have happened and had spent the past several days haunted by bad images of what it could be, while conversely, Yuichi's mail sounded casual like nothing had happened.

This is just... a regular email, huh.

It might have been overreacting suspicion on Wataru's part, when Masanobu had just stolen his lips and Wataru had just delivered Masanobu a thorough rejection and run off. But having his lover return his own ring? Whatever the reason for it, it had to be considered an emergency. Wataru felt uncomfortable at the difference in interest between him and Yuichi, and he found himself thinking back to the incident in town that day.

Come to think of it, Kazuki's not the only one with problems. I need to get my ring back, too.

Even if it had been unavoidable, if Wataru gave him the whole story, Yuichi would not be amused. Wataru considered putting aside his own issues... then quickly grew embarrassed, recomposed himself, and decided to try giving Yuichi a call. Yuichi had considerately offered to call, but the expense of traveling there and staying there was already a major burden on him. Now that Wataru had made it into college and he was in a position to work part-time without cutting into his studies, he clearly wanted to be able to get some economic equivalence.

"Don't get antsy over how long it's been..."

He felt the ring in his hand to make sure it was

still there, and called Yuichi up on speed dial. His pulse jumped almost comically with the ringing noise the call made.

“Wataru?”

One ring in, he immediately heard the voice he'd missed for so long. The hurried tone made it apparent that he had been waiting for contact from Wataru. Thank goodness, Wataru thought to himself in relief, and slowly sat back down on his bed. It was his Yuichi, unchanged from the way he'd been.

“Kazuki, I read your email. Is it okay for me to call now?”

“Sure, but isn't it really early where you are? I didn't think you'd still be awake. Or did I wake you up?”

“I—I was up. Now that I'm free from exams, I can watch late-night programs and stay up all I want on the Internet, y'know. Man, I've been one hell of a night owl lately.”

“... Liar.”

The triumphant chuckle on the other end saw right through Wataru's empty boasts and left him embarrassed. *If you can read that much into me, contact me sooner!* Wataru thought to himself before cutting in.

“Hey, uh... You don't need to call back. Is it okay to keep talking like this?”

“I don't mind, but are you sure?”

“It's fine, don't worry. It's not like we're talking for hours on end, anyway.”

How strange... Wataru thought. He had been so brimming with anxiety, yet just hearing Yuichi talking

so normally calmed his mind. There was a lot he wanted to ask, and he felt the dilemma of being unable to speak face to face, but at the very least, pessimism no longer seemed necessary.

"You tried to contact me a lot... I'm sorry for worrying you."

"Sure... But there was an emergency, wasn't there? Mizuho had just undergone a difficult surgery. I looked it up and learned how rough heart surgeries are."

"Wataru..."

After that one word from Yuichi, sounding caught off-guard, a brief silence set in. It felt like Yuichi was smiling as he followed up in a gentle tone.

"Thanks. She'll be fine now. The doctor says she's out of critical condition."

"Oh, so that's why you postponed your trip home, because of Mizuho. I was sure of it."

"Is this about the ring?"

"....."

He cut right to the heart of the matter and left Wataru no room to cover it up. With nothing else to add, Wataru fell silent, and Yuichi spoke in a meek tone.

"Sorry. I should apologize for sending the ring without explaining myself. It was more than Mizuho. I also got caught up in a little accident of my own, and... I couldn't contact you right away."

"An accident?"

The ominous-sounding word made Wataru's pulse grow stronger.

"Kazuki, was the accident..."

"It's fine. It's totally my fault it took so long to

contact you. Even without that I gave you a pretty big scare with that stunt, and I'm really sorry."

"Aw, man... Forget about that. I'm the one who told you to go to New York. It's not entirely your fault. If you want to go that route, it's no one's fault, and I certainly don't blame Mizuho. That's not what I wanted to ask, Kazuki. I..."

"I know, you want to know why I sent it back. I figured I should talk to you about it."

"Kazuki..."

Compared to Wataru, who was driven by an impatience he didn't understand, Yuichi seemed entirely calm and indifferent. He had said he was sorry for making Wataru worry, but did he really have any idea how helpless Wataru had felt up through today? The sense of discomfort he had felt before came rising up within him once more. He wondered to himself where this disjointedness had come from.

"Kazuki, um..."

"I might have given you the wrong idea by not explaining it. But I said right there in my letter that I was entrusting it with you, right? I'll start by making it clear that I wasn't giving it back."

"You... weren't?"

He did have a point. The word 'entrust' implied 'taking it back.' But he had just considered it a fancy word in the circumstances with Yuichi postponing his return.

"I don't understand, Kazuki. Spell it out for me. What on earth happened?"

"I'll tell you everything when I get back, okay?"

I'm more worried about the contract on that rental house right now. It's been some time since we went by. Did you give them a response?"

"Er..."

"Don't tell me you forgot about it. You might not appreciate just how good of a deal that place was."

"....."

So what? Wataru wanted to snap. Even leaving aside the accident and the ring, Yuichi had frightened Wataru so badly, yet he only gave simple apologies and refused to explain himself. Wataru had never thought Yuichi's attitude was so far apart from his own. Even if it was born from his kindness, Wataru didn't need that kind of sympathy.

"Kazuki, is that rental house more important to you than my feelings?"

"What...?"

The words slipped out of Wataru's mouth before he could consider them, and they rang out coldly with irritation.

"You know how badly it shocked me when the ring arrived, don't you? Yet you still refuse to tell me anything? Kazuki, you're always like that. You always try to bear everything by yourself. You say you don't want to worry me, but am I that unreliable?"

"Hey, this is all out of the blue. I was just..."

"Hasn't it been the same way with the rental house?"

"Wataru..."

Yuichi was clearly taken aback at Wataru's sudden angry outburst. But the moment Wataru

verbalized the dissatisfaction that had been smoldering all this time within him, his anger and anguish came flooding out as though a dam had broken.

"I appreciated your consideration, Kazuki. I had my hands full focusing on exams, and I was happy that you didn't want to bother me with other things. But aren't we going to live together? Didn't we start helping each other out equally and living as partners?"

"That's not..."

"So why didn't you talk to me first? Something like, hey, I'm going to search for a place, or, hey, this place looks good so I'm going to preview it. If you had, I would have been grateful. Thanks, you said, you'd be sure to repay this debt once I passed. But in reality, you've done nothing of the sort. You make all the arrangements yourself and consider it perfect if I just sit and smile wherever you set us up. You call that an equal relationship?"

Wataru was aware that the conversation was moving in an increasingly odd direction. Right now he should have been asking what Yuichi's intent was behind sending his ring, and he could have saved other complaints for later. He understood that logically, but he couldn't stop all the thoughts that he had kept buried for so long.

"Kazuki, do you remember what you said about Asaka?"

"About Asaka? What are you talking about now?"

"You said maybe his way of staying one step ahead and pampering his partner had been a burden on

his late girlfriend. Those were your words. But... Right now you're doing the same thing."

"....."

"I'm not with you to be pampered. I love you, so I want you to recognize me as a person. I just want to walk the same path together. Why can't I ever get that through your head?! Why don't you understand that?!"

Wataru's inflections grew agitated and his voice trembled, but Wataru was hardly in any state to notice it. He had even forgotten the presence of Yuichi's ring clenched in his hand. What was important wasn't the form, but the sincere thought put into it. They should have learned that by now, but the two suffered as always from their posturing.

"I..."

Yuichi finally spoke up in a stunned voice.

He never would have imagined such harsh condemnation coming from Wataru.

"I just wanted to say..."

"....."

"Whatever happens, I want to come back to you. Something happened that made me feel strongly that way. That's why I wanted to entrust the ring with you."

It was apparent that Yuichi was working to maintain a calm front in the face of Wataru's agitation. He had the voice of someone who had predicted, correctly so, that one slip of timing or wording could end in disaster.

"It's a special ring, one that bound you and I together. I'm sure it will bring me back to you. Others might laugh it off as empty consolation, but I really

wanted to believe it. When Mizuho's condition was up in the air and I had no idea what my prospects were for getting back, I couldn't stand to do nothing."

"That... that's..."

Was that really his whole incentive for it? He should have been ready for concerns with Mizuho's illness from the start since he went to the U.S. with that in mind. It sounded strange for him to turn so pessimistic afterward. If that was the case, he could have handed the ring to Wataru before leaving Japan. Didn't it make more sense to use the ring as a consolation for loneliness while separated?

"That's just self-gratification."

There must have been more to this. Wataru spoke coldly in hopes of drawing that out.

"Couldn't you have just written that in your letter?"

"I told you, I meant to call you right away."

"But you didn't, and I've been biting my nails here for three days now! And then when you do, you don't say a thing about it. Of course I don't just accept that."

"Then what should I say to make you believe me?!"

Yuichi finally raised his voice and snapped, in the course of this conversation with no points of agreement in sight.

"What I'm trying to tell you is... Dammit, how'd we end up talking like this? Anyway, I've made it through everything now, and I've got nothing to worry about. As soon as I get a plane ticket I can head back,

and we can put this stupid fight behind us.”

“Head back...?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I wasn’t out of contact for days because I wanted to be. I’ve wanted to hear your voice so much these past three days. I wanted to see your face soon and hug you tightly.”

“.....”

Yuichi’s tone sounded like he was spitting it all out, but Wataru knew he was telling the truth. After all, Wataru had felt the exact same way. He wanted to see Yuichi’s face, to feel his warmth directly, to hear him call Wataru’s name over and over.

But... Wataru thought to himself with a growing desire to cry. This wasn’t right. It couldn’t be right. His new life with Yuichi was supposed to be filled with hope beyond blemish. He had never wanted to enter a nest just for protection and comfort.

That’s not it... One day it will be hard to stay together. If I really love Kazuki, I should get this fight over with right here. I can’t give in to loneliness without settling this right, and I can’t lose sight of our future.

Wataru’s heart was on the verge of breaking, and he sat up straight as if propping it up.

With this being over the phone, he had confidence that he could handle it. If he had been face to face with Yuichi, just seeing his face would have made Wataru drop everything and forgive it all. He wasn’t that strong, and even now he couldn’t help but love him.

But he had hurt Masanobu badly to protect his love when Masanobu had been so kind. He couldn’t stand the thought of losing that love by walking the

same road.

I'm not Yuina. I... I wouldn't give up on Kazuki.

On the other side of the phone, an uncomfortable silence remained as Yuichi awaited Wataru's response.

"Kazuki, I... I want to take some time and rethink living together."

Masaaki opened the entryway door and strode right in without waiting for an invitation. It was the attitude of someone who had come and hung out there for years and knew his way around. Wataru watched his back as he headed into the living room, thinking to himself, *Huh, he seems to get along with Kawamura.*

"What's with you, Wataru? You look like you're at a wake," Masaaki sat down on the sofa and blurted out rudely, as arrogant as ever. "You'd better not be regretting running into my brother."

"Huh?"

"Hey, cut it out. He finally made up his mind, and he's departing for New York with me the day after tomorrow. In two weeks he'll come back for preparations to study abroad, then it'll be a formal move. Shohei's already found a tenant for his house in Tokyo. Looks like he's finally given in. My brother's hiring has been postponed indefinitely. Serves that guy right."

"Yeah? So he finally persuaded Shohei to let him go."

After all of his twists and turns, Masanobu seemed to have calmed down as far as he could manage. Wataru envied Masaaki, whose wish had been granted and who was now smugly enjoying himself.

"Want something to drink?" Wataru asked him.

His conversation with Yuichi had unfortunately ended without either of them reaching the same wavelength. There were limits to how long they could talk on an international call, and neither of them got a definite answer. Another three days had passed since then, and Yuichi still hadn't told him a date for his return. Wataru had spent those days wrapped in melancholy and fitful sleep, and even today before Masaaki's visit in the early afternoon he had been tormented by a vague, unpleasant dream.

"Oh? Not around today?" Masaaki called out to Wataru hesitantly as Wataru headed to the kitchen to fetch a drink.

"Not around? Who?"

"Your little sister. She was in a big huff before."

"Oh, Karin? She's at school today."

"Ahh," Masaaki responded in a straightforward, casual tone. As Wataru returned with a can of juice, he grew more guarded. *Is he...?* Come to think of it, he had previously called Karin "cute" or something. Wataru shot Masaaki a warning glance as if telling him not to joke around right before returning to the U.S., but Masaaki showed no sign of noticing and blithely took the juice and started drinking it.

"Hey, so I heard you turned down that rental house you were going to live in with Yuichi Kazuki?"

"H-How do you know about that? Ah, through Shohei, right?"

"Well, it was a referral through him. What did you expect?"

"Drop it. It's none of your business."

Wataru really didn't want to discuss it, and he took a curt tone.

Geez... Stuff like this really gets around fast.

Yuichi would have contacted Shohei. He probably passed word on to Masanobu, and Masaaki must have gleaned some of it and come over to hear the full story. It was a cancellation after keeping the realtors waiting until the very last minute, so Wataru had gone there in person yesterday to apologize. It didn't mean he was going out on a new househunt, and the matter of living together was left up in the air, so Wataru, the main party, was at a loss as to what would happen next. For the moment, nothing could start until Yuichi came back.

"What an idiot." Masaaki gave an exaggerated sigh after hearing Wataru's words. "Are you two serious about living together? Don't be so stubborn, you've got to see the big picture here. If you start searching now, you won't find any good deals on a place. That place would have been your perfect love nest."

"Big talk from you. Shouldn't you be more worried about Asaka than me?"

"Shut up."

If Yuichi and Wataru weren't getting along, it might shake his dear brother's heart. Perhaps that fear was bothering Masaaki as he folded his arms with a deadpan expression.

"I just can't comprehend it. For one thing, why isn't Yuichi Kazuki coming back?"

"I don't know. Kazuki's got his own reasons."

I'm just trusting in him and waiting."

"Is he really coming back?"

Masaaki went right for the most painful question, watching Wataru with a searching look. But it sounded more like he was asking, does he want to come back?

Kazuki... I guess you're mad. You said you'd be back soon on the phone, and haven't said a word since then. But I thought about what I said when I said it. I just hope you understand that...

Wataru fell into sullen silence and gulped down his juice. He hated to admit it, but in reality, he had no idea what Yuichi was thinking right now. But if he was hesitant to return, the fault would clearly lay with Wataru.

I want to rethink living together... I sure blurted that one out.

Thinking back on it again, Wataru was mortified at his own audacity. When he had said that so suddenly over the phone, Yuichi fell silent, then quietly answered with, "I see." He said nothing in particular about reconsidering, and didn't offer a single word of complaint. Instead, the conversation naturally grew more stilted and ended that day with a lingering sense of awkwardness.

And because of that, I didn't even tell him the important part. That my ring... is in Masanobu's hands.

That was far more important to discuss with Yuichi than him coming back, the rental house, or anything else. He felt dejected as he considered this, but he had brought it on himself and there was nothing he could do for it now. The more pressing matter on his

mind at the moment was when Yuichi would return. He wanted to get his ring back before then.

"Say, Masaaki. You said you were departing the day after tomorrow?"

"Yeah, but that's got nothing to do with you."

"I can't quite agree with that."

"Huh?"

Masaaki looked baffled at Wataru's words. He must not have known anything about the ring. But if Wataru didn't do something by tomorrow, the ring would be beyond his grasp for another two weeks until Masanobu's return visit.

Asaka must be in a bind from having to handle it, too. He wouldn't keep the ring out of spite or malice. I'm sure the only reason he hasn't done anything yet is because he's been trying to consider the best way to give it back.

He was wounded more deeply than anyone, yet even now he was still concerned on Wataru's behalf. That kindness was heart-rending to Wataru. He couldn't meet Masanobu directly, but it would likely be best for both of them if he made an effort to get the ring back.

"Actually, could I ask you a favor, Masaaki?"

"Me?"

Masaaki had cheered on Wataru and Yuichi's relationship. Surely he'd hear Wataru out with pleasure. Wataru started to speak up when Masaaki spoke up first.

"Come to think of it... Wataru, you dumped my brother totally, right?"

"Er..."

"Otherwise he wouldn't have been so reluctant to speak to you in town. He's been acting funny lately. Even in preparations to go to the U.S., he's started getting evasive. It felt like he was trying to force himself somehow, and that gave me the general gist that something conclusive must have happened between you two."

Masaaki was as surprisingly sharp as ever when it came to his brother. Wataru wasn't certain how to answer him, and Masaaki continued right on with no regard for Wataru's bewilderment.

"Or so I thought. Actually, these past three days, he seems to be strangely over it."

"Over it...?"

"Yeah. After he ignored you and ditched you to go into the bookstore that day, he told me he had some business to attend to and went out by himself. Then, once he got back... He had this oddly relieved look on his face."

"....."

What could that mean? Of course that made Wataru happier than hearing that he was depressed, but there must have been something specific that caused his demeanor to change in half a day's time. Wataru sensed Shohei's hand in this and abruptly tensed up. Shohei could easily create some cause for this. After all, he was a genius at getting people to dance in the palm of his hand.

Trouble is, there are so many times when it can't be assertively declared good will...

He must have let his imagination get the best of

him, because Masaaki pressed on with a no-nonsense expression.

“Wataru, anything spring to mind?”

“Er... Well...”

“I asked my brother if something had happened. He wouldn’t give me the details, but he said that he had managed to smoothly resolve something that had been bothering him. I’m wondering if Shohei got involved, like maybe if my brother met with Shohei after the bookstore incident.”

“H-How do you figure that?”

“Shohei smokes foreign cigarettes. Masanobu had that smell on him when he got back.”

“Masaaki... You’re amazing.”

Wataru admired him from the bottom of his heart and knew that Masaaki was matching his own intuition.

The thing that had been bothering Masanobu was probably how to return the ring. He might have given it to Shohei in the flow of things, but he had yet to hear anything from Shohei. He might also be up to something, but Wataru doubted that Shohei was the type to go so far as to conceal other people’s things.

He’s always a problem, but... I don’t get it. It was always like he was testing Kazuki and I. Even when he applied psychological pressure, he never told a blatant lie or tried to deceive us. We would just misunderstand each other, treat that misunderstanding as the truth, and get led astray...

And that just made it all the more difficult to deal with. Wataru couldn’t hate him, but he couldn’t trust him

either. As an ally there was no one more reassuring, but so long as Shohei sought to make his brother walk the straight and narrow, he would never accept him having a lover of the same sex.

"Nothing springs to mind, but I'm glad Asaka's doing well. Thanks for sharing that with me, Masaaki."

"Wasn't really bringing it up for your benefit, but whatever. So what favor did you want to ask me?"

"It was... Nah, forget about it. I'll handle it."

"Huh? I don't get you."

When Wataru tried to smile and shrug the matter off, Masaaki gave him a sour look that indicated he was not amused.

"Look, just so we're clear, it's too late for you to start having regrets now. I'll introduce my brother to a girl that's right for him. I've got to help cheer him up again."

"Yeah, I know. I've got no right to want that now, but... I really do want that for him."

"... I guess that'll be fine."

Meddling with girls was probably overstepping his bounds, but Masaaki shared Wataru's desire for Masanobu's happiness. Masaaki gave a firm nod and composed himself, then patted Wataru on the back.

"You hang in there too, Wataru. I'll be cheering you on from New York. If you ever come by and hang out, I'll take you wherever you like. Have fun with Kazuki."

"Ah... Thanks."

"We've been at odds, but I don't really hate you or anything. We would've hit it off sooner if not for my brother. Oh well, what can you do? Say hi to your sister

for me.”

Masaaki headed out with a smile and those parting words. Wataru watched him go and resolved to himself to show some courage.

“All right.”

Time to see Shohei and ask about the ring.

When Wataru dialed up the cell phone number he'd previously been given, Shohei readily agreed to meet with him. Considering Masanobu had quit his part-time assistant position and Shohei had more work to handle, Shohei's voice sounded unexpectedly chipper. Maybe he had finally admitted defeat after being thwarted so much or was just letting it go.

... No, this is Shohei we're talking about. He could be up to something.

Wataru had been through too much at his hands, and he had his suspicions from the start that something was up. He smiled wryly and reminded himself that this was Kazuki's brother.

Kazuki said he had looked up to Shohei when he was little.

Yuichi had said that his attraction to Mizuho might have also stemmed from his aspiration to be like his brother. That was how big of a deal Shohei was to him. That had all changed when Shohei opposed his going out with Wataru. That had turned Yuichi's admiration into a drive to surpass him.

But that same Yuichi had yet to return to Wataru.

Kazuki, what are you doing? Nothing can begin

unless you come back. Didn't you declare to Shohei in Okinawa that you would make him give us recognition?

As Wataru headed for the coffee shop he knew so well that happened to be the designated meeting place, his gaze wandered several times to the crowds of people around him. Despite knowing that Yuichi should still be in New York, he couldn't help but search for him in the crowds. The cool northern wind from when he had sent Yuichi off had shifted to a gentle spring feeling at some point.

"Two o'clock on the dot. You're very punctual, black-eyed brat."

"Shohei-san."

Shohei disregarded the sour face Wataru made at still being called that and greeted him with a sneer.

"I know you just got here, but an urgent appointment has come up. Would you mind coming along?"

"Eh?"

"It's right nearby, don't worry. The renovation club is coming in to help as well. I got a request to convert a run-down bread factory into a secondhand clothing store."

"Ah, hey, wait a moment!"

Wataru didn't even have time to sit down before hastening after Shohei, who wasted no time in settling his check. Just getting worked up over this left him a little deflated, but he liked to see work sites, so he was a little happy.

"Oh? Isn't that the underclassman?"

As he set foot in the modest factory ruins, an old familiar term rang in his ears. Shohei had entered from the back entrance, and Wataru had watched the renovations at an out-of-the-way corner. The one who spotted him was Mitsuki Naruse, a renovation club member.

"Long time no see. I heard from Kawamura that you got accepted into M-U. Congratulations."

"Ah, thank you very much. I hope everyone's doing well?"

"I can't say they're exactly doing well... It's touchy, I guess."

"Eh?"

Wataru looked taken aback at the unexpected response and Mitsuki shrugged weakly.

"I'm sure you know that Asaka's suddenly decided to study abroad? The other members are all still in shock over it. Asaka explained himself to us, but everyone here was drawn to the club by him."

"Ah... I see..."

"It's a big deal. We have to pick our next club leader and reconsider what our future activities will be. Though Kawamura will also be joining in the spring."

She smiled weakly with the implication that that alone would be a big help. She was, frankly, his real objective in joining. She had agreed to date him if he got accepted into college, and by his reports things were going well between them.

He has been coming by to help... I guess he's becoming a formal member now.

Wataru wasn't in a situation that could be considered happy, and he sincerely wished that at the very least things would work out well for his best friend, which was all the more reason he wanted the circle to stay together even after Masanobu left. For his own part, Wataru had done his fair share of odd jobs helping out on site, and the cheerful group referred to him fondly as "Kazuki's underclassman," something he enjoyed. This was also the place that would mark the first step toward the future goal Yuichi found for himself.

"Oh, yeah. Is Kazuki still in New York?"

Mitsuki dropped Yuichi's name as though she had eavesdropped in his head.

"He hasn't given you any word, Underclassman? Everybody's waiting for him to get back."

"Yeah, well... I'm waiting for him too."

"I see. Well, if you don't know either, then we're out of luck. You two really go great together. If anyone ever gets nosy about you, Kazuki gives them this casual glare. Everybody talks about that cute side he's got to him."

"Oh, uh... Is that right?"

Wataru grew a little awkward at being spoken of so favorably. Maybe it was because Masanobu was in the same place, but in the club, Yuichi never hid his possessiveness of Wataru. That had created some tension and awkward silences at first, but now it had become an old, familiar scene. Even when they had fights over misunderstandings, Yuichi had protected the twin rings, and that had become a memory more precious than anything.



... Hey, I'm way too young to get all reflective!

Wataru hastily scolded himself to snap out of it. This was no place to indulge in sentimentality. He still had a meeting with the last boss to face.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, black-eyed brat."

"Shohei-san..."

Shohei emerged from the factory with a smile, showing impeccable timing. In his refined clothes, he stood in sharp contrast to the other staff in work clothes in varying states of roughness. He issued instructions briefly to the person in charge at the site, then strode calmly over the gravel at his feet toward Wataru.

"Sorry to drag you along for this."

"I don't mind. Um..."

"Hm?"

"I've said it many times now, but please quit calling me 'black-eyed brat.'"

Wataru offered up a meek sign of resistance as Mitsuki quietly watched with a scandalized sidelong glance. But Shohei smiled coolly and gave him a smug look as though he hadn't heard him. Wataru was about to let out a sigh of defeat when Shohei suddenly cut in.

"I hear you turned it down?"

"W-What?"

"The property I referred to Yuichi. I got word of the cancellation from him the other day."

"Ah, um... I'm sorry for letting your favor go to waste!"

"No, really, I don't mind in the least."

"....."

That was true. For Shohei, hearing that they

were putting off living together was delightful news. Wataru puffed out his chest with a cheerful, smiling face, thinking to himself, *You think I'll lose?*

"But we'll consult you again together once Kazuki gets back, okay?"

"Once he gets back, hm?"

Wataru grew more sullen at having his words thrown back at him so pointedly. Shohei was making it sound like Yuichi wouldn't come back.

"I heard from Yuichi that you were the one that said to cancel it. He went to all that trouble to arrange it and it just wasn't good enough for you."

"That's not the problem at all. I was just..."

"Now now, calm down. Why don't we be off for the time being?"

"Eh?"

"There's a car waiting out back. I'm done with work here, so let's have a change of venue."

Shohei started walking as he spoke, and Wataru hastily moved to catch up. As he ran, he gave a perfunctory bow of his head to Mitsuki. Mitsuki raised her right hand in a small wave and said, "See you."

"Wouldn't discussion of Yuichi be better done in the car? Appropriate discussion with appropriate flow."

"Ah... Yes."

The car that awaited them was not the sports wagon that Wataru had ridden in previously. It was a metallic silver Ferrari. Shohei unlocked it remotely and smoothly slid into the driver's seat with practiced motions. The refined design and luxurious leather interior suited Shohei so perfectly that it seemed to have

been made to order. Wataru approached the passenger side and timidly opened the door to get in.

"For the music... Anything should do. Any requests, Wataru?"

"N-no thanks."

"Oh?"

Wataru respectfully shook his head and Shohei slowly started up the engine. As he did, a woman's sweet, husky singing voice drifted leisurely from the speakers.

"Ah, that's..."

Wataru spoke up without thinking when he heard the familiar melody. It was one of the songs on the CD that Yuichi had prepared when they took a trip to Okinawa last summer. It brought back memories of Yuichi speeding in a rental car and the sense of the translucent blue sea and the pleasant southern wind.

Come to think of it, we agreed to live together after getting accepted into college back in Okinawa.

That was also the point when Shohei had declared open hostility for the first time.

Eight months had passed since then.

"Wataru, you had good timing."

"Er, how do you mean?"

"Today's actually the last day that I can spend time on others. Kirie's condition isn't good, and she went to the hospital this morning for tests. She might be hospitalized depending on what's happening. If that came about, someone would have to look after the house and Takako."

"Kirie is...?"

Wataru grew confused as to why Shohei would

tell him this. Surely Wataru, his enemy and younger brother's lover, would be the last person to whom Shohei would want to show weakness.

"Ah, what's wrong? Are you that surprised?"

Shohei gave Wataru a sidelong grin as he drove the car smoothly.

"I owe you a debt from the Puru affair. I told you I'd repay that someday."

"B-But..."

"Takako's in good spirits thanks to you, and Puru's made an impressive full recovery. Kirie... Well, her condition isn't all that serious. There, I've laid out my weaknesses for you. You're free to exploit them as you please. Incidentally, Yuichi doesn't know of this yet either."

"I don't exploit people's weaknesses."

It was probably the answer Shohei expected, but Wataru couldn't go without saying it. For one thing, the debt Shohei referred to, when Wataru wanted to cheer up Shohei's daughter Takako who had been moping over her dog Puru being sick, was not something Wataru had done with the intent of being owed a favor.

"I think Takako's a sweet girl. If she's happy, that's all that matters."

"I'm glad to hear that. After all, you're Takako's 'Prince.' Right, black-eyed brat?"

"....."

Takako certainly took a shine to him, and it seemed that that did not amuse Shohei in the least. Shohei didn't look like the kind of man with any sense of life, much less a wife and children, but he had a

surprisingly fatherly side to him, and Wataru came to strangely admire that.

"I hope Kirie gets better soon."

"Yes, I can't imagine life without her."

"Eh...?"

Wataru found himself growing flustered at seeing Shohei respond without any hidden subtext. Sometimes someone showing their true side was very embarrassing. The triumphant smile that Shohei gave upon seeing Wataru's embarrassment hinted that this, too, was something he had calculated.

The car left the residential district and headed for a busy main road. The weather was fair, and the roadside trees had cherry blossom buds in early bloom.

"Still, it must have taken a lot for you to make that cancellation. Yuichi wasn't opposed to it?"

"It surprised him, but... There had been a few misunderstandings before that point that added up to what got discussed there. He said that since I proposed it he wouldn't question it, so I'm sure he understands."

"Hoh. How sad. My dear brother, dominated so soon? Well, I suppose he brought it on himself this time, and it brought more results than I anticipated."

"Than you anticipated?" Wataru repeated, startled. Had Shohei known it would turn out this way?

"When Yuichi asked me to refer him to a realtor, I said, does Wataru know about this? He replied that he didn't want to distract you during your critical pre-exam period. Even though knowing your personality, a dispute later would be inevitable."

"You... didn't tell Kazuki that?"

"Why would I?"

"....."

That was a dumb question. Shohei wouldn't save them from trouble in advance. He just heard out his dear brother's request and referred him to just the property he wanted. There was no reason to blame it on him. It wasn't anyone else's fault.

"Kazuki's feelings really made me happy. That was why I went ahead and let him pick the rental house even though it gave me mixed feelings. But he always bears everything himself, not just this time, but all the time. He doesn't let me bear any part of it. That hurts."

The words came spilling out of Wataru's mouth like something had snapped. Shohei silently drew out a cigarette and lit up while waiting for a light to change. The pointed silence bore down on Wataru, and when the car started moving, Wataru started talking again.

"Even with Mizuho, he tried to call off the trip to New York without saying anything. He won't tell me the reason his return has been postponed, either. No matter how many times he repeats over the phone that it's fine, I can't relax. I am younger than him, and I might be just an ordinary guy compared to someone like Kazuki who can do anything, but I love him more than anyone. Not being able to look out for such a great partner, that just makes me feel pathetic. It bothers the heck out of me."

"Love him more than anyone, hm? First time I've heard a line like that from a guy."

"It's got nothing to do with being a guy or a girl. It's an important fact for me, so I just stated as much," Wataru retorted firmly, shrugging off Shohei's half-jest.

From the moment he had realized his love for Yuichi, gender, age, and society had lost all meaning to him.

"But Kazuki might not have felt that way. I might have appeared at my younger age to be someone that needed protecting. I hated myself for making him feel that way, and it's driven me nuts not being able to do more than sit on my thumbs when something happens. So, at the very least... I can't do anything to hurt Kazuki. I even said those horrible things to Asaka..."

"May I ask you something?"

"Eh...?"

"Did you dump Masanobu for Yuichi's sake?"

"....."

Wataru hesitated before answering. At the time all he could consider was declaring his separation from Masanobu, and he'd had no room for thoughts of for whom he was doing it. He didn't want to see him in pain and he could hardly bear the strange feeling of guilt he felt toward Yuichi. If he had to say it was for anyone... it had been for himself.

"I..."

"You know, true love acts on ego. Pretty words and idealistic thoughts alone won't bring it anywhere but a grinding halt. You two think about nothing but your partner, with nary a thought on your own behalf. Isn't it about time you understood why I don't support that?"

"Shohei-san..."

"My desire is for Yuichi to be happy. If being with you brought happiness to my brother, I would side with you right now on the spot. That's if Yuichi ca

genuinely say he's happy being part of a couple society refuses to accept, even if it makes both of his parents cry. But he'd have to keep saying that ten years or twenty years down the road."

"....."

Shohei's unflinching tone left Wataru overwhelmed and at a loss for words.

For the first time, he found a part of himself taking Shohei's words seriously. He had thought Shohei had taken a stance in opposition to same-sex love, and that he meddled with it like it was a game to him. But Shohei had his own brand of expectations for the two of them.

"Say, black-eyed brat. Why don't you show me this unchanging love?"

"Shohei-san..."

"You can say whatever you want with words. Young people especially love to play around with words. Frankly, I've grown sick of hearing that 'love' line from you. If you want to get me on your side, you'll have to show it in your actions. Am I right?"

Shohei kept pressing the stunned Wataru.

"You should absolutely get his relative on your side. That is, if you intend to always live together with him."

"Always... live together...?"

"Isn't lodging together the first step toward

Had Wataru lost sight of something so fundamental? Wataru reddened all over in embarrassment at the implication of what he was being told. Regardless

of the details, it was a fact that Yuichi had been working toward that end. And yet Wataru's own sulking attitude had narrowed his vision, and he had sought an excuse to criticize Yuichi out of his own anxiety and mistrust.

I was... lonely. Kazuki went to see Mizuho, and deep down I guess I really was sad. That drove me to get worked up over even his kindness...

Wataru's gaze drifted down to his now-unadorned left ring finger.

Yuichi's ring was at his house, and his own ring was in Masanobu's hands. Wataru had called Shohei out to ask him to be an intermediary in getting it back, but he had lost all desire for that now.

I... guess so. Right now is no time for us to be worrying about appearances. Even if the other ring returns to this finger, there's no point in posturing with the feelings inside it.

His ring carried many memories. Of course, his powerful desire to get the ring back hadn't changed.

But what he had lost sight of now and so many other times was that the rings always came back to their ring fingers, as if drawn by fate. There could be no doubt that surely it would come back this time when it was the right time for him to wear it. If he believed in his love of Kazuki, coincidence would eventually place that ring on his ring finger again.

"My, my. You're looking subdued now. Where's your usual spirit?"

"My spirit's right here. My plans have just fallen a little flat, so I haven't got much to offer."

"Uh huh."

Wataru was defeated and peeved, and he gave a cheerful smile. In fact he had been at least a little relieved of the depression he hadn't been able to fathom. He took a deep breath and looked out the window, and saw that at some point they had come near his house. Familiar scenery drifted by.

"Though if it was that easy to regain your footing, it wouldn't be entertaining for me."

"While I hate to disappoint you, I don't pick quarrels for your entertainment. I should talk to Kazuki before it turns into a quarrel. What I want out of this is to confront all of our dissatisfactions and tell him, hey, don't show off all by yourself!"

"Couldn't you call that a quarrel?" Shohei stifled a smile and put his cigarette out in the ashtray. "But this time you had every right to criticize him. Leaving his lover alone on a critical exam day and flying overseas to see an ex-girlfriend? He's made some seriously terrible moves. In that sense, he can't beat Masanobu."

"Can't beat...?"

"Yuichi hasn't lost something yet."

Why bring up winning or losing when the one he had chosen had been Yuichi? As Wataru considered that doubt, Shohei answered it with a brotherly expression.

"He's never crawled up from rock bottom. Fighting the pain of losing something isn't as easy as it sounds. His romance with Mizuho ended like a game of house and left no scars. But it didn't go that way for Masanobu."

"....."

"Masanobu being drawn to you and not giving

up was equivalent to seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. It ended in getting dumped hard, but at the very least he made it back out into the daylight. That strength of his might surpass Yuichi's passion one day, don't you think?"

"Th-The one I love is Kazuki!"

When Shohei sought Wataru's agreement with a smile, Wataru gave a firm denial in response. Shohei's phrasing was so persuasive that one could find themselves in agreement if they let down their guard. But Shohei muttered a confident, "Is it?" and pushed strongly on the throttle. As he looked ahead, he spoke in a cheerful tone as though pleased by something.

"You should make certain to understand this. The moment you dumped Masanobu, he and Yuichi became rivals in the truest sense. I'm sure Yuichi is starting to feel that as well."

"That's not..."

"And unlike previous occasions, Yuichi's got the worse odds this time. This isn't a question of which of them you love more. In a sense, their pride and spirit are on the line."

Shohei smiled at him and sought his agreement with a look that said, *am I wrong?* Wataru shut his mouth in consternation. Essentially, Yuichi and Masanobu were destined to oppose each other regardless of Wataru having anything to do with it.

"... Now then, we'll reach your house soon. Where would you like me to drop you off?"

"Ah... Sorry for having you take me all the way back..."

Wataru had Shohei stop off at the same place had dropped him off last time and thanked him once more. When he unbuckled his seatbelt and started to open the door, Shohei spoke from behind him as though it was an incidental matter.

"You're not going to ask?"

"Eh?"

"What did you want to ask of me when you called me out? Or is there no more need to ask it?"

"Shohei-san..."

Wataru looked back at him briefly, then gave a small nod. "That's right."

He had found his answer. All that was left was to keep his eyes forward and advance.

"I like it, black-eyed brat. Can you see a little of the world around you now?"

"I told you, please stop calling me that."

"Okay, in deference to those cheeky eyes, I'll tell you something nice."

"Something... nice?" Wataru responded warily as he stepped out of the car. Considering who he was talking to, it couldn't have been trivial. But Shohei's eyes shined mischievously from the driver's seat as he smoothly spoke a fact that blew all trust out the window.

"Yuichi's back in Japan. He should have arrived late last night."

"Eh...?"

"I called Mizuho in the hospital to check. I'm concerned as a relative too, you know."

"No... way..."

As if to add one final insult to the injury of those words, Shohei smiled faintly and added, "It's true."

Wataru remained standing stock still even after Shohei started up the car and left.

Masanobu finished packing his things and closed his canvas suitcase with a light huff. He had done everything that needed doing for the day of departure tomorrow.

"Brother, I hope you're not having second thoughts?"

"Eh?"

Masaaki had stepped into the room and watched his efforts without offering any help. He asked that question of Masanobu with an inquisitive look. Masanobu lifted his head with a smile and looked around the room.

"I guess I'll be saying goodbye to this room very soon. I'll be back in two weeks, but once I get back, I'll have to start preparing to move right away."

"You sure about leaving your college? You would have graduated in another year, but you gave them notice that you were withdrawing. Didn't you say at first that it was a temporary absence?"

"Why are you bringing this up this late in the game, after you bugged me so much to quit college in Japan and go study abroad in America? This won't be a short-term study. Even if I did stay registered, there's no telling when I'll be back, so there's no sense in paying more tuition."

"Well, I mean..."

Masaaki flopped down onto the bed with a childlike sullen expression.

"Now that it's been decided, I guess it doesn't feel real. Living with you has been a dream of mine, and mom and dad will be happy too, but... it feels kind of anticlimactic."

"Don't bring that kind of thing up now. More importantly, are you all right with leaving? You won't be coming back. If there's anyone you want to talk to first..."

"I met up with Wataru, so I'll be fine."

"Ah..."

Masanobu's expression grew unintentionally perturbed at hearing the unexpected name. He had told Shohei they had reached a mutual understanding, but he hadn't expected them to hit it off well enough for there to be any sad feelings when they parted ways.

Geez... Just hearing the name gets me like this? I need more discipline.

Masanobu quieted his agitation, and a wry smile made its way onto his face.

I've already made up my mind, though. I am going to go forward without looking back.

To say he wasn't lonely would be a lie.

If he had wanted to always remain by Wataru's side, the best way to do that would have been to stick to the position of being a good confidante. But burying his feelings would have been lying to himself, and he couldn't stand going without confessing his feelings, even if it hurt the one most important to him.

That was why Masanobu had accurately

predicted that his selfishness would lead to separation.

"Say, Brother. There's something I've wanted to ask you for a while now."

"What is it?"

"Well... Have you really given up on Wataru? Because if you're studying abroad just to forget about him, I'd be against it. It's not your style."

"Masaaki..."

Masaaki rose abruptly and looked back at Masanobu with an intense gaze. Their features had some resemblance, but Masaaki had a personality more different from Masanobu's than one would expect of two brothers. Masaaki's blunt temperament with its lingering traces of childhood and its intensity occasionally left even Masanobu stunned. He was bright and assertive and while his open hostility toward Wataru from the start had left him at a loss, those same eyes that questioned the intent of their target now turned upon Masanobu.

"Masaaki, don't underrate me that badly, okay?"

"Eh...?"

Masanobu smiled faintly and delivered the determined line with no hard mettle behind it. This time it was Masaaki who was taken aback. He peeked at Masanobu with upturned eyes and an uncomfortable expression.

"Underrate? I wasn't really..."

"I can't say that my studying abroad is completely unrelated to Wataru. What made up my mind for me was when I embraced my special feelings for him. But that's only one factor."

"One factor?"

"Yes. I'd been staying in the same place ever since I lost Yuina. Wataru being there helped pull me out of there. He cried for me. I was filled with nothing but regrets, and he did all he could to show me a caring attitude. Caring for someone isn't such a bad thing, and he taught me that through his own actions, against my own pessimistic perspective."

"Brother..."

That was why he couldn't help but be drawn to him.

Masanobu continued to carry a torch for Wataru in his heart. Even knowing Wataru's feelings for Yuichi, knowing that he loved that sideways profile, knowing that no future with Wataru could ever be possible.

"Masaaki, you might not tolerate your brother falling for a man. But thanks to that, my eyes have been opened. I'm going to take better care of myself from now on. I'm going to aim higher and higher, to become someone that would bring no shame to Yuina or Wataru. Studying abroad is my first step toward that goal."

"....."

"Masaaki, I..."

"Eh?"

"I... will probably love Wataru for the rest of my life."

His feelings fell from his mouth perfectly naturally.

Masaaki's expression got a pained twinge.

"I won't say I'll never love again. But I'm sure I'll keep loving Wataru. I want you to know that, if no

one else."

"Why me...?"

"Isn't it obvious? Because you're my brother."

Masanobu gave a gentle, faint smile as he spoke.

Masaaki had his outbursts on occasion, but he had always put his brother first. He wanted his brother to be happy more than anyone, and put forth effort toward that end. When he had shown ill will toward Wataru, Masanobu had been at a loss, but that didn't weaken his sense of gratitude for Masaaki's concern.

"Wh-what's your deal? If that's a joke, it ain't funny."

Masaaki snapped at Masanobu in an effort to hide his embarrassment, but his face still reddened visibly. Masanobu gave an exasperated sigh and looked at the pocket on his luggage.

"All that's left is... this, I guess," Masanobu murmured and slowly extended his right hand. He ran his hand over the outer pocket with a fastener on it, checking for the ring in its white envelope.

Had the ring heard their conversation just now?

The words he couldn't convey, that Masanobu would always love him?

8 p.m. ... He should be around at this time right?

Wataru stood before the entryway clad very lightly, and took several deep breaths before pressing the doorbell. The last time he had visited Yuichi's rental house had been on the way back from the first shrine

visit of the new year, and he could hardly believe that only two months had passed since then.

Come to think of it, I waited here for Kazuki to get back. I had heard that he'd gotten injured at a renovation club site... I barely felt alive then.

Yuichi's body as he clung to it. The strength of the arms that wrapped around him in return.

The scene that brought that recollection back so clearly was proof of the love they so dearly shared. It was because of the accumulated courage that it gave him that he was able to muster up the courage to visit today.

"Yuichi's back in Japan. He should have arrived late last night."

If what Shohei said was true, then why didn't Yuichi call him even once? Wataru just couldn't figure it out no matter how much he mulled it over.

Kazuki...

He had realized a fact from his talk during the day with Shohei.

That was the fact that he and Yuichi had persisted with no regard for reasonable limits or self-control. They each considered the other too important, and at some point they had grown afraid of hurting each other. Even at times when it would have been better to give in to selfishness and damn the consequences, they had both kept their impulses restrained down to the wire.

But we couldn't help that, could we? Even at the best of times, Kazuki and I had tons of problems. We were lucky to have people like Kawamura and Karin who understood, but two men can't go around as lovers in our society. And there was even opposition from

Shohei, a relative...

Changing an unstable and fragile relationship into a bond that would last into the future.

Wataru had gazed upon Yuichi up until today with that idea alone as a goal. They were both still minors and unable to do much. Even fulfilling the one dream of living together required parental cooperation. And before them, they had to act as a simple upperclassman and underclassman, constantly living a lie. To avoid letting that reality overcome their fledgling romance Wataru had kept repeating to himself that he had to get stronger.

But I couldn't have kept pushing myself like that forever...

He would relax his shoulders and stand before Yuichi as he was. He would give voice to all the complaints on his chest and rail at him until his voice gave out. When he worked up that defiant attitude, he couldn't help but miss him. He wanted that mean, pretty face to smile and call him a dummy again. He wanted to hear him call "Wataru..." in a tone that sounded like murmuring a secret.

... Okay.

The moment he mustered up his courage and lifted his finger to press the doorbell...

The cell phone thrust in his pocket suddenly started vibrating.

Eh...? Eeeh?

Wataru grew agitated and momentarily unsure of whether or not to pull it out. It was in vibrate mode and the unceasing buzzing drove him to act quickly in

his indecisiveness.

Aw, man. Guess I have to.

It didn't seem like it would stop vibrating even if he ignored it, so he grudgingly drew the cell phone out. He didn't want to be heard talking inside the house, so he walked away from the entryway and answered, "Hello?" His main priority was to get off the phone fast and regain his courage.

"Sorry, I'm not sure who this is but now isn't the best time..."

"... Wataru."

"Eh...?"

The voice that reached his ears made his chest contract.

Wataru's heart jumped, and he stopped moving as though he was frozen in place.

"Wataru...? Can you hear me?"

"Ka..."

"Hello? Wataru? Hey, Wataru?"

"Kazuki..."

Wataru could scarcely believe the stunned murmur of response came from his mouth. Wataru heard a faint hesitation in that befuddled voice. But Yuichi quickly recomposed himself and called his name again.

"Wataru... I'm sorry..."

"....."

"I'm sorry... really, I am. I've made you wait so much."

What was this sorry business about? If he was going to apologize, he shouldn't have kept Wataru

waiting. And he had gotten back last night, so why wait until now to call? Wataru wasn't going to accept any lame excuses like jet lag.

The gripes came one after another in Wataru's mind, but he couldn't put a single one to words. His right hand trembled as it gripped his cell phone, and his heart raced so fast he was getting dizzy.

Right now, Yuichi shared the same skies as he did.

That fact alone was enough to put him on the verge of tears.

"Kazuki, you... You..."

"Where are you right now? I'm back at the rental house, so..."

"You don't know? Dumbass!"

Wataru grew snappy at his casual tone and yelled into his phone. It probably bothered the neighbors, but all concern for that had flown out the window. Wataru grew profusely upset, and got even more irritated at himself for getting so worked up.

"Wataru? Are... Are you...?"

As Yuichi spoke, the phone hung up. *What the hell?* Wataru thought to himself and glared at his cell phone. A moment later, he heard a door slam open and footsteps rushing toward him from behind.

"Wataru!"

"Eh?"

As Wataru started to turn around, he found himself getting embraced with no idea what was happening for a moment.

"Wataru... Why...?"

“Wh-What do you mean, why...?”

Yuichi had come running from his room and embraced him like he had come out of a dream. Yet he still kept repeating, “Why?” as if in a delirium, still unable to believe this. That familiar warmth and the scent of Yuichi that only Wataru knew enveloped him all over, and Wataru found himself taking it in with his eyes closed.

But...

“D-Don’t mess around.”

Wataru regained his bearings, but when he tried to flee from his partner’s arms he barely put any real effort into it. He certainly wasn’t such a sucker that he would just accept this reunion gracefully right here.

“Let go! Let me go! What’s with the sudden return?!”

“Wataru...?”

“You keep talking about making me worry. I know you got back yesterday! Why call me now after all that posturing?! Don’t mock me!”

The moment he started to gripe, the anger brimmed over like a dam had burst. It had nothing to do with how much he loved Yuichi. He had been embraced impulsively and shown just how much he had been missed, but even so he couldn’t just turn around and forgive everything.

“Wataru, hey, calm down. Hear me out.”

“Shut up. Let me go!”

“Wataru!”

Wataru struggled hard in Yuichi’s arms, and Yuichi tried desperately to calm him. He didn’t dare

release his firm hold for fear that if he let Wataru go now, he could lose him forever.

"Let me go... Kazuki..."

"Wataru..."

"You're so... I hate you. I hate you. You stupid..."

Wataru's struggles grew weaker before he realized it, and his curses came in a choked-up voice. His words grew slurred, and when he tried to hold it all in, his throat trembled and he was no longer able to speak.

"You're... such a..."

Even being embraced tightly enough to take his breath away, even feeling the strength of the fingers clutching into his back, Wataru couldn't calm down. He kept muttering into Yuichi's chest, and as he started to settle down, he tried to shove himself away from Yuichi's arms as though in a show of defiance.

"Ow!"

A pained moan escaped Yuichi's mouth. Wataru stopped his resistance and looked up at Yuichi in surprise. Yuichi's grim expression was locked and tense, struggling to control the pain. Wataru's anger abruptly abated and he nestled against Yuichi with color in his face.

"Kazuki... are you injured?"

"Don't... worry... Just a little scratch."

"When was it? In New York?"

Wataru had heard nothing at all of this. Yuichi still looked down at the agitated Wataru with a smile.

"I finally get to see you face to face again."



Wataru, you're too spirited."

"Kazuki..."

Now that Wataru got a good look at him, he could see that Yuichi's left hand was all bandaged up. When he tried to ask what kind of condition it was in, he got the dismissive response of, "It's fine now. I just took a painkiller. Still, that was pretty bold of you in a shared living space."

"Er... Ah..."

"I heard you yelling right outside. The moment I realized you were nearby, I threw all reason to the wind."

"....."

"But you know I won't let your referring to me as a dumbass go."

Yuichi's expression regained its usual confidence. It looked like the pain had mostly subsided. There was the egotistical expression Wataru knew so well. It fit his pretty face perfectly.

"Hey... Kazuki..."

"Hm?"

Wataru felt like he had to say something. Something to convey his feelings.

"Well, um..."

"....."

"... Welcome home..."

The voice sounded like it would vanish as it escaped from Wataru's lips. Yuichi's body acted impulsively and pulled him close once more. Fortunately no residents had come out, but even if they did get spotted by someone like this, he didn't care.

"K-Kazuki, hey..."

"Wataru... Wataru..."

Wataru chafed and fidgeted in his hold, but there was no resistance in it. Hearing his name repeated like a prayer made his mixed-up reality feel further and further away.

"Wataru..."

As his name kept getting called, the strength gradually sapped out of his body. The fingers wrapped around his back trembled bravely. It was ample conveyance of how anxious he had been. Yuichi embraced Wataru strongly in his right hand and kept repeating his name, over and over.

"Wataru... Wataru..."

How long would he keep going?

I missed you. I'm sorry I worried you. You must be angry that I came back without saying anything. All kinds of lines floated around in his head, but they were nothing compared to what he wanted to say the most.

"Wataru..."

Yuichi released Wataru slightly to gaze upon him from the front.

"I love you."

"Kazuki..."

Wataru choked up and his heart was pained.

It was a pain he had never known until he fell in love with someone.

"I... love you, too..."

Wataru quietly let out a deep breath with his eyes closed.

He felt a faint, pleasant warmth extending as far

as the fingertips in his back. Wataru could no longer tell why they'd been apart for so long or how he'd buried the loneliness.

"Man, I'm beat. The place was closed off for nearly a month and it took all last night just to ventilate it and clean it up. You wouldn't believe how much mail and email had accumulated, and I could hardly follow the stuff on the news. It feels like I've been out of Japan for years. Even my luggage was a pain to deal with. I should have gone over there commando style."

"Kazuki, you didn't leave your key with anyone in the apartment building? You could have said something to me, and..."

"You just finished your exams. Didn't you want a chance to spread your wings? Besides, I never planned on taking this long to get back. The original plan was to come back in two weeks."

Wataru entered Yuichi's one-bedroom suite for the first time in a while, feeling alien and restless. Wataru composed himself and dismissed the feelings as due to him being gone for a while, then took a seat in his usual spot.

"Wataru, want something to eat? Have you had dinner yet?"

"If you're hungry, let's go out together somewhere. It's been a while. I don't know what all you ate in New York, but you loved the 'Ginryu' and the 'Ikomaken,' right?"

"You're sharp," Yuichi answered with a smile as he emerged from the kitchen with a mug in hand.

Wataru volunteered to do it, but Yuichi said he'd need to get used to using a stiff hand for a while and put coffee on with surprising grace.

"Still, a home really changes when no one lives in it. This has been an educational experience."

Wataru sat on the bed and looked Yuichi's way as he talked about different trifling topics. The way he kept chatting on about how he hadn't called his family yet, how his head was still fuzzy from jet lag, and other such things gave the impression that he was avoiding the main subject.

Kazuki... Are you really back...?

Wataru smiled and nodded on the surface while quietly reflecting on his conversation with Shohei. If he wanted to get Shohei on his side, he had to demonstrate an unchanging love through his actions. That was what he had said.

Frankly, I've got no idea what I could do to offer proof of my love. But would Shohei stop being my enemy if we managed it?

He could scarcely imagine it, but if he really did it, it would be a miracle in a sense. Once Yuichi heard about it with his unyielding spirit, he would throw that spirit into it without a doubt. But he was no more likely than Wataru to have any idea of what would satisfy Shohei and make him recognize them as a couple.

But...

The sound of love lingered softly in Wataru's ears.

"Wataru... Wataru..."

The voice that repeated his name so raptly was

pleasantly clear. Wataru couldn't express how happy he was to hear that sound, as if in a dream. His heartbeat leapt in joy, and he repeated, "I love you too" in his mind over and over while tightly returning Yuichi's embrace.

That voice alone is enough for me.

But right now was no time to be fixated on that. Before they could get Shohei on their side, they had a number of issues of their own to discuss. That was why Wataru had come today, and he wasn't content with the vagueness of embracing and whispering love to one another.

I'm sure Kazuki believes that too. That's why he's avoiding brushing up against the subject carelessly.

Despite his faith in Yuichi's love for him, Wataru found it a bit lonely having their first rendezvous in so long take this form. But they could be together any time they wanted from now on. Avoiding the present issues and focusing on future enjoyments would be a foolish move.

"Sorry for not contacting you last night."

Yuichi must have finally braced himself as Wataru's mind wandered. He set his raised mug to the floor and gazed straight at Wataru.

"I reached the apartment late at night and needed to collect my thoughts before I could call you. But after one night's rest I wanted to see your face. Once I felt that way and figured you were somewhere where I could meet you immediately... well, I couldn't hold it in anymore."

He added with a sheepish smile that he had gone to the hospital and hadn't expected it to get this late. His

smiling face hadn't changed one bit since before they parted. There was the Yuichi that Wataru knew so well.

"Still, I never expected you to be right here. You really surprised me there."

"That goes back to what I said before. Shohei told me you were back. He really dotes on you, and he sounded like he was pretty worried."

"And so he contacts his ex? That wasn't a visitor's phone either."

"That's... Well, it sounds like something he'd do."

"He really does just do what he wants."

Yuichi had once given a thoroughly exasperated description of Shohei's feelings, that he "only had one thing important to him," and now Wataru understood that. Shohei treasured family more than anything, and went out of his way to thoroughly eliminate anything that endangered his family. He had also said that consideration in half measures was cruelty.

"Say, Kazuki."

"Hm?"

"You'll talk to me this time, won't you? About why you delayed your return so long... and the ring."

"....."

"You didn't want to worry me needlessly while we were separated, right? But you're back now. I'd like for you to open up about everything, right here and now."

Yuichi looked thoughtful for several long moments.

"... There was an accident."

He spoke up as though he'd been prepared from the start for this. He started explaining himself in an indifferent manner to avoid letting it get overblown more than necessary.

Yuichi explained that Mizuho's condition had suddenly taken a turn for the worse, and that when he was on his way to the hospital he was caught in a collision. That examinations took longer than he had anticipated and that he hadn't been able to make it back to the hotel. Wataru paled visibly as he heard the truth of the accident that Yuichi had let slip over the phone.

"An accident...!"

"Don't make that face. I made it out with nothing but my left hand injured, as you can see. But I had to remove the ring to treat the injury... And when I did, I got anxious all of a sudden."

"Kazuki..."

Yuichi's eyes got a pained twinge, casting a shadow on his pretty face.

"On top of getting in an accident at the worst possible time during an emergency, I couldn't even wear my ring. I was convinced that it was some kind of bad sign. Even after Mizuho recovered, there was no telling what would happen to her next, and after that I had this throbbing pain in my head and shoulders. I was really stumped as to when I could get back. Asaka being at your side also made it hard for me to stay calm, honestly."

"... Sorry..."

"It's fine. It's not your fault. Besides, weren't you way more anxious than I was? That was why I didn't say

anything when I heard from Shohei that you took Asaka to the beach. I couldn't criticize that. It just renewed my desire to get back to you soon."

"....."

When he had to discuss difficult topics, Yuichi never beat around the bush. He listed out his feelings at the time offhandedly, in a tone steeped in self-deprecation. By speaking as objectively as possible, he sought to leave formal judgment to his partner.

I see.... So that's why he said, "Entrust."

Not having his partner there when he wanted to see him—the irritation from that formed small ripples that grew vast. In this past month, Wataru had experienced this same truth enough to leave a sour taste in his mouth.

That was why he got it.

He got why Yuichi sought to entrust the ring with him after being so agitated by the series of accidents.

"I'm sorry for giving you lousy excuses. But that ring has been guiding me all this time. It led me to meet the owner of the matching ring, you; it led me to accidentally swap rings at the water fountain when I thought it was unrequited love; and it led me to finding the love that I had given up on. That was why I wanted it to draw me back this time as well. To Japan... To you."

"You could have at least written a letter explaining that..."

"What we just discussed? You think I could write something that girly even in the distant future? I'm telling you now because it's necessary, but even now it's awkward as hell for me. Praying on a ring and sending

it back all sentimental-like... The biggest blunder in Yuichi Kazuki's life, I tell you."

Yuichi glared defensively as though daring Wataru to object, and Wataru's slack jaw remained dropped. Sure, there was no denying that the ring he sent back had arrived at the worst possible timing and that it had delivered a shock far greater than normal, but if he'd added even a brief note about it, it could have averted all of that confusion.

"The injury was worse than expected and that threw a wrench into my plans. I'd calculated when the letter would reach you and I'd intended to talk to you by phone. I mean, if I'd put something like, 'I was in an accident,' in a letter, wouldn't you totally panic? I figured that at least by phone you'd hear me talking and have proof that way that I was fine. Well, I will admit all that reading into it backfired on me..."

"So, you meant to call me right away, but the injury caused you to relapse at the hospital and from there you kept getting stalled? While I was pacing alone and kept calling your hotel and cell phone..."

"... Sorry about that."

"Don't give me that 'sorry about that' crap!"

Wataru stood up in a fury that made him momentarily forget himself. He glared down at his partner, and Yuichi returned the look with a serious, unflinching gaze.

"I know you were in a tight spot, Kazuki. I sympathize with that. I understand that the timing kept getting worse and worse, and that it wound up going in a bad direction. But you're wrong. At that point, the worst

thing you did out of all of that was make me worry. Am I wrong?"

"Wataru..."

"I'm sure you had your own pressures. I also committed the sin of making you anxious. But at least I didn't keep anything secret. I even told you everything about Asaka. That was because I wanted you to give me the same courtesy!"

Wataru's unconsciously clenched fists started shaking slightly. As Yuichi looked upon him, Yuichi's eyes narrowed at Wataru's words as though biting back pain.

But Wataru couldn't afford to give in.

Right now he had no intention of giving in to his caring feelings for his beloved Yuichi.

"Kazuki, didn't you tell me once that there would be no holding back or restraint between us? You must have noticed, though... we've been doing just that without even realizing it."

"....."

"Answer me!"

"... Yeah."

Yuichi gave a firm nod after a brief silence.

"Yeah, I have. I've been thinking the same thing."

"Wanting to understand my partner, to not hurt my partner, thinking of nothing but that... You and I both wound up only looking right in front of ourselves at some point. We've been thinking too hard and going in circles."

"Even when it's really just something simple... right?"

"Yeah. But so many things have happened, and I was reminded along the way of how much I loved you, Kazuki. I figured I had to get stronger. At some point that might have lost all other meaning. Even though all I really wanted was to be at your side."

Before Wataru knew what was happening, his field of vision started to blur. His head grew feverish, and he couldn't even grasp what they were talking about. *Snap out of it*, Wataru reprimanded himself firmly as he tried to brace himself on both feet. He couldn't muster his strength, though, and he was on the verge of slumping to the floor on his knees.

"You okay?"

Yuichi hurriedly rose and extended a hand out to support Wataru in his collapse. He grabbed Wataru's arms and leaned in close to study him. His face had grown pale with worry.

"Wataru...?"

Wataru started brimming with tears from the love that gushed forth from him.

"I love you... Kazuki..."

Wataru's lips unconsciously formed the shape of those words. He had only lived for eighteen years, but he doubted he would ever find another partner he could love so much.

"I adore you. I really love you, Kazuki."

"Wataru..."

Yuichi's eyes trembled slightly, and he gently released the arms he had been clenching in fear.

"Wataru, I..."

"It's okay. I know what you want to say. I mean

to say the same thing.”

“.....”

“Let’s put off living together and keep living as we have been. You in your rental house and me with my family. Right?”

Yuichi showed affirmation in his strained silence in response to Wataru’s statement. The reason he couldn’t put it into words was because he was still internally conflicted. Of course, so was Wataru.

I want to be together without parting for even a moment. I want you all to myself, morning and night.

It took a lot of effort to suppress those feelings. Not to mention, there were no visible obstacles before them, and if they felt like it they could go out househunting again as early as tomorrow.

But... We can’t get carried away now. After all, we’re not strong. We’re still weak and children, wishing to be strong...

Life with Yuichi had been a support for Wataru while he studied for his exams. It was because he’d had that dream that he felt so hard pressed to pass no matter what happened, that he had been able to endure events that had shaken his heart.

“Tell Yuichi that I’m turning against you.”

Shohei’s proclamation of open hostility that he had delivered at the hotel in Okinawa, during summer last year.

“It might be troublesome for you, but would you mind if I loved you?”

The sincere confession of love from Masanobu that stained his heart during that fall visit.

More scenes came floating into his head and vanished one after another. Kawamura's smiling face as he said, "You're my friend, right?" Karin's voice cheering him on, "Hang in there!" The words, "Don't lose, Wataru," from Masaaki who had been so hostile at first.

That's right... I've forgotten the most important thing. I'm not in love with him to make it last a long time. I fell in love because I wanted to be happy, because being with Kazuki makes me happy.

That was why he shouldn't try to force any odd self-restraint. If he felt like something was wrong, he shouldn't ignore those feelings. That was different from his feeling of loving Yuichi.

"Come to think of it, you said something on the phone, right?"

"Eh?"

"That I was acting the same as Asaka. Yelling at me, demanding to know why I couldn't see that even when I just wanted to share your path. That stung, you know."

"Kazuki..."

Yuichi grumbled with a lonesome smile and hesitantly extended his right hand again. His fingertips gently brushed around Wataru's eyes as Wataru remained motionless. He brushed the tears away softly with the ball of this thumb and gave another genuine smile.

"If we put off living together, my desire to keep you all to myself will worsen. Be ready for that."

"... Sure."

"Once the time comes that we can live together

with nothing on our chests, I won't let you go all day. I hope you realize that?"

"I... I know that."

"Good enough, then."

So don't cry anymore. That was the implication as Yuichi touched his forehead to Wataru's.

"I'll tell you now. When I feel desire and devotion, I get out of control."

"Can't you do whatever you please right now anyway?"

"That's not what I mean. Even Asaka is within an inch of his life by now. And not just him. I'll eliminate anyone, man or woman, who bats their eyelashes your way. Are you conscious of that?"

"That's a pain of a door to open..."

"I'm not going to give priority to your circumstances anymore, all right? I'm going to act solely in my love for you. All that beating around the bush and having it blow up in my face has thrown me in a bad spot too. So... Let's go out and do it right?"

Yuichi gave Wataru a bold gaze as he said that.

It was a look that said he had heard Wataru's complaints and recognized them in his own way.

"Oh, right. There's one more thing I want to tell you."

"Eh?"

"Asaka sets out for New York tomorrow, right? Truth is, I made arrangements to meet with him beforehand at the airport. It was more like being called here if you want to get technical, but he went out of his way to make an international call."

"Then, is that why you returned so suddenly last night? To meet with Asaka?" Wataru responded in a sullen tone.

"It's an excuse, dummy. Truth is, when I heard your gripes on the phone, I wanted to get back right away. But it sounded like your cancellation of the rental house was something you'd thought out carefully. I knew you didn't say that out of goading or retaliation. I figured I should think over what led you to that conclusion."

"Kazuki..."

"But I couldn't make sense of it without cooling my head. I actually felt pretty glum for a while, too. Then while I was dealing with that, Asaka called me up... He said he wanted to return your ring."

"Ah..."

Yuichi casually brought up the thing that had been bothering Wataru for so long. Wataru had felt many times that he needed to fess up, but he just couldn't bring himself to open up about it, and that made him ashamed of himself. He had criticized Yuichi just now with righteous indignation, but he had had no right.

"Kazuki, I'm sorry. Kazuki... I'm really sorry..."

Wataru apologized earnestly with a desperately trembling voice. He explained everything, from what happened between himself and Masanobu to how the ring passed to his hands.

"I see..."

After a long silence, Yuichi spoke in a low voice.

"You did well, Wataru."

"Kazuki..."

"When I heard Asaka was staying in Japan in my place, I couldn't help but suspect it. But I trusted in you. I trusted that this time you'd give your answer."

The answer he spoke of was Wataru's parting with Masanobu. Yuichi had bitten back a jealousy that was nigh unbearable and waited until Wataru fully made up his mind. That made Wataru happy, but at the same time, Wataru cursed his own weak-mindedness for having inflicted pain upon him.

"Kazuki, I don't really hate Asaka. I care for him as a person, and I look up to him, too."

"... I guess you would."

"So, I hope that one day... it's more like a dream than reality, but I'd like to meet him again normally one day, when he's gotten over his feelings of love. I'll be honest with you about that."

"....."

"But until that day comes, I won't see him again. That's been decided."

With that firm assertion from Wataru, Yuichi's eyes finally softened. He drew a small breath, smiled, and responded, "I see."

"Wataru, I love you. There are people in society who say that men shouldn't state that so bluntly, or make prejudiced comments. But the phrase, 'I love you,' rings in the heart more beautifully than anything else. It warms it. So I won't begrudge that, not for you."

Yuichi continued to murmur with a smile, lips brushing over Wataru's eyelids. Yuichi's fingers had patiently waited and minded their manners until Wataru

aired everything out, and then they combed through Wataru's soft hair. His touch was so pleasant, it slowly melted Wataru's tense heart. Wataru closed his eyes and clung to Yuichi, letting out a breath with feeling.

"I don't regret letting you go to New York, but we pushed it a little."

"Yeah."

"When you cut communications, I couldn't let that cell phone out of my sight. I was really, really worried. When I saw that ring when you sent it back, I'm not lying, my vision went black."

"... Sorry."

"If you're going to apologize, don't do that again. Come on, Kazuki. Rely on me more. Spit out your complaints and vent your anxieties. If you love me, that's all the more reason to do it. Promise?"

"All right."

The voice that responded with so few words sounded like it was holding in a small laugh. Wataru lifted his face to give Yuichi a lightly indignant glare.

"I won't begrudge anything either, okay?"

"Eh?"

Perhaps Wataru had spoken too soon. Lips quickly drew close. The moment they started to touch faintly, they came together with unexpected vigor. Wataru had meant to steal a kiss but instead his own lips had been stolen, and they closed together passionately. They were sucked at voluptuously, and as a tongue slipped in and started to toy with his, Wataru was awash in a sensation akin to dizziness.

"... Mm... mmm..."

Their lips exchanged a damp warmth that even moistened their breath. Long fingers combed through his hair, the caressing stirring him wildly.

"Ka... zuki... Kazuki..."

"Wataru..."

Yuichi kept kissing Wataru at different angles, and Wataru's heartbeat raced like an alarm bell. His chest ached sweetly, and his rough breaths escaped his lips at fleeting intervals.

"I love you, Wataru..."

Yuichi clutched him against his chest and repeated that unceasingly.

The words of love piled upon him, and the voice calling to him engulfed him like a wave.

This was the place where he had taken three planes to arrive from New York the night before last. Yuichi felt oddly strong feelings in the face of the fact that he was here this time as a guest to see someone off.

Well, it's not exactly seeing him off. He just asked to meet and the place happened to be the airport, that's all.

Even if it was wrong to feel that way, Yuichi had no desire to pray for a safe trip for that man. As he took the escalator up to the third floor departure lobby, he wondered what kind of expression he should show when meeting a man who was practically passing the baton to him on his way out. Regardless of anything else, this was the man who had the temerity to steal a kiss from Yuichi's lover while he was gone, and that was hard to forgive.

And for a second time, to boot. Getting tutoring from him after that kiss at the post office? Isn't Wataru a little too innocent for his own good? And why do we have to talk alone together, anyway? I don't care if he meant to do this last, was it necessary to take that into consideration?

Without noticing, Yuichi's complaints stopped being directed solely at Masanobu and shifted to include Wataru. But it was all rooted in Yuichi leaving Wataru behind and flying to New York. Knowing that made him unable to blame anyone, leaving an undirected jealousy smoldering in his heart. If he saw Masanobu's face in this mental state, he seriously doubted he would be able to carry on a civil conversation.

Let's see... The rest area at the #1 counter would be...

The airport was approaching spring break time, and it was relatively sparsely populated in the early part of the afternoon. The English announcements instinctively reminded him of the hospital in New York, but making it back like this made it feel like that was already far behind him.

"... There it is."

Even from a distance, Yuichi could make out a young man with an attractive figure that caught the eye, sitting in a chair. He was clad in a spring coat and had a luggage satchel draped casually to his side as he read a book of some sort. His calm demeanor spoke of one used to traveling, and the atmosphere around where he sat felt different.

He was as loathsome as always.

Yuichi glared at him without realizing that he was drawing a similar amount of attention from those around him. Masanobu looked up from his book in Yuichi's direction right away, as though he had felt the daggers Yuichi was glaring into him.

"Ah, Kazuki, you came. I was afraid you'd stood me up."

"Certainly not. I wouldn't miss this."

Now that he had found Masanobu, there was nothing for it. As he approached, a cheerful, friendly smile crossed his face.

"My, you look a little frightening. I don't suppose it would help matters any to ask you to stop glaring at me like that?"

"I'm not really glaring. You and I have just never exactly been on speaking terms."

"Oh? Weren't we an upperclassman and underclassman in the same club?"

"....."

Just hearing from Wataru last night about how he lost the ring made his calm face start to lose its composure. But Masanobu was probably feeling just as awkward. He had to reconfirm that he had been firmly dumped in front of his romantic rival.

But, you reap what you sow. Who the hell would show sympathy for that?

Yuichi sat next to him while silently cursing him. Masanobu probably had no desire for his sympathy, either.

"... Well? You don't have much time either, do you? Get to the point. I took three planes to get here and

I'm too tired to deal with this crap."

"Yes, that was impressive of you. I never expected you to fly right over. You could have waited for me in New York without rushing it, you know."

"Me? Wait for you? Good one."

Yuichi's flat dismissal made the smile on Masanobu's face falter. But there was no way in hell Yuichi would sit there waiting for Masanobu in the city that he had gone to and made Wataru cry in. As he had told Wataru last night, he had in fact hesitated in coming back, but deep down inside he had wanted to get back soon. Wataru was all alone and engulfed in anxiety, and Yuichi had wanted to embrace him with everything he had. Yuichi was now greatly ashamed of his own weakness that had prevented him from doing just that. His mind was preoccupied with how to achieve victory from here on out.

"What about you, Kazuki?"

"Eh?"

After an uncomfortable silence, Masanobu began speaking in a thoroughly disinterested tone.

"Well, you must have heard a lot from Wataru. Things like what happened between us while you were out of Japan. He probably gave you everything down to the little things, all accurately."

"... Yeah."

Darn right he did, Yuichi silently added.

If he hadn't, Yuichi sure wouldn't have shown up today. Masanobu had gotten straight to the point without beating around the bush. He had told Yuichi he wanted to return the ring. At first Yuichi was taken aback with

no idea what this was about, but it quickly fell into place. The cause of Wataru's emotional instability did not lie solely with Yuichi's postponement of his return.

At that point, all his odd worries had flown out the window. When he found the direct flights all booked, he searched for the fastest route to reach Narita, gave Mizuho a hasty farewell, and left New York behind.

"Kazuki, I'm sorry. Kazuki... I'm really sorry..."

Wataru had acted so tough, but when he confessed to not having the ring in his possession, he had broken down in tears. Even if Yuichi burned with jealousy, he couldn't get angry after hearing that voice. He had gone back to his usual determined self quickly, but that moment in which he had come apart at the seams and acted tough had hurt Yuichi's heart.

"To tell the truth, I should have handed it right back to him on the spot after picking it up, but..."

Yuichi showed a bitter side profile, and Masanobu also kept looking straight ahead at his side as he spoke.

"Well, I just couldn't stand it at the time. How could this boy not notice me when I loved him so dearly? I felt so frustrated, and it made me a little spiteful."

"Well, what can you do?"

"Eh?"

"I'm the better man than you. Of course Wataru would fall for me."

"....."

Yuichi glanced Masanobu's way with a cold gaze and caught a fleeting glimpse of a stunned expression.

Masanobu was taken aback and looked ready to respond with a sarcastic retort, but then he just sighed in defeat.

"Yeah, maybe... I guess it would be something like that."

"What's with that tone?"

"Didn't they use to say that love is blind?"

When Yuichi snorted and looked back at him, Masanobu's smile had slowly returned to his face.

"Kazuki, your demeanor has changed a little. You were only gone two or three weeks, but New York must have been a heck of an experience for you. More than before..."

"Don't put on airs with me."

"No, I mean, it's like... I don't feel needless animosity or belligerence from you anymore. It's a shock."

"Why?"

"Strong emotions belie an inferiority complex. I considered myself superior when you didn't hide your animosity, but it seems like your attitude is mostly changed now."

He had some charm for a sore loser, but Masanobu was expressing genuine admiration. Sure, shove it down my throat, Yuichi thought to himself, privately unamused. Nonetheless he had been praised, so he accepted the assessment gracefully.

"I won't forgive what you did to Wataru, but bitching you out now won't make me feel any better. Besides, Wataru's not trapped anymore. It's not for me to butt in on."

"Not trapped...?"

"He told me that he cared for you."

"Eh...?"

Those unexpected words took Masanobu off guard, and agitation crossed his features. Yuichi sighed in exasperation and reflected wryly on the fact that Wataru was the one to break Masanobu's poker face.

"I see. That makes me really happy."

"In Wataru's words, it's not love, but it really hurts to break it off. It's a painful choice when someone has to cast something aside to protect something else. That's why he hopes that if you've chosen to start over and study abroad, that he can meet you again in a different way one day."

"And in either case, I'm not on his radar, huh."

Yuichi found Masanobu's disappointed smiling look to be refreshingly reassuring. Masanobu had gauged that Yuichi had changed, but now he showed Yuichi that he had grown more tough and strong.

"... Upperclassman Asaka."

"What? It's kind of weird hearing you call me upperclassman."

When Yuichi addressed him again, Masanobu looked lightly with slightly wary eyes. But Yuichi had to talk straight here. To overcome his own mistakes and his own sins.

Yuichi took a breath, folded his arms, and looked to the side.

"This whole series of events can be chalked up to my mistakes. When you kissed Wataru once, I told him not to forgive you. But this isn't about forgiveness or lack of forgiveness. Because I was wrong."

"Kazuki..."

"No matter who I had to give up, no matter what it took to convince Wataru of it, I should have never left Japan. I don't regret going to America, but I believe that from the bottom of my heart."

"....."

Masanobu was dumbfounded at first by the abrupt confession. But then he did like Yuichi and quietly averted his gaze as though he was thinking to himself. He couldn't bear to look at that averted side profile, but he was surely accepting the pain of love head-on.

How strange, Yuichi thought to himself in the silence. What he had just said was his true feelings. But he also couldn't deny the feeling that things went the way they had to go. The reason for that was that even if he could turn back the clock, Wataru would still advise him to go to America, and he would still probably accept that himself.

So basically, it was inevitable, huh...

As long as he remained Yuichi Kazuki, and as long as Wataru remained Wataru Fujii, the actions that they needed to take would come to them naturally. If that was the case, then the troubles and misunderstandings that kept plaguing them weren't there to draw them apart, but rather were placed there for them to overcome.

"Say, Asaka. Have you really gotten over Wataru?"

"That's a sudden question to ask. Or are you worried that you need to double check?"

"There's that too."

When Yuichi gave an unexpectedly direct

answer, Masanobu's complexion shifted an amusing amount. The ordinarily calm and collected man who never forgot his maturity and composure showed open consternation. Yuichi found himself amused despite himself and finally relaxed his posture a little.

"Last night, Wataru spent the night at my place. I'm so tired from that, I don't have the energy to get upset."

"Now, look..."

"Besides, no matter how much I hate you, I'd rather not beat a dead horse."

"... Listen to you."

Masanobu gave a defeated-sounding sigh, then responded with a faint laugh. It looked like Masanobu had broken the tension as well, and was starting to follow Yuichi's pace. They would never get along or shake hands, but without Wataru there, they never would have made such strides. Considering that, Yuichi found himself feeling that meeting Masanobu was also a necessity.

But that doesn't mean we'll be sipping tea together in our old age.

Yuichi was gripped with conflicting emotions, and he smiled wryly at that in amusement.

"Looks like the time's getting closer," Masanobu said as he looked at the digital clock display. He drew out a white envelope from the satchel at his side and presented it before Yuichi.

"Wataru's ring is inside."

"....."

"I want him to get it back from you. Don't worry,



"I didn't put in a letter or anything."

"I'm not worried about that, and I shouldn't be. I don't know how you feel and I don't care, but Wataru's totally over you. He wouldn't have said all that if he wasn't prepared for it."

Yuichi took the envelope with no further ado and felt it over for the ring. It was a simple ring with a thin golden line through the middle. It was a mundane design, but it had a priceless value solely by virtue of being owned by Wataru. Just as Yuichi thought to himself that it was finally back, a belated fact occurred to him.

"Ah..."

"Is something wrong?" Masanobu inquired with a confused look in response to Yuichi's sudden slip of his voice.

"Is there some problem with the ring...?"

"I see, this ring... I get it..."

"Kazuki...?"

Masanobu looked increasingly perplexed as Yuichi broke the envelope's seal without explaining himself. He ignored Masanobu's weak protest and emptied the ring out of the envelope and into his left hand.

I'd totally forgotten but... You used to be my ring, didn't you?

A replica he had gotten his cousin Toko, an engraver, to make for him. That was this ring. What led to his unrequited crush on Wataru was his ring, so Yuichi had wanted one with the same design. Of course he didn't tell that part to Toko, but she pieced it together

anyway and cooked up facts to tell Wataru himself, like that she had been asked to make the same ring as the one he loved, and let it slip.

I was really burned when I got told that, but the end result was that it cleared up a misunderstanding. Wataru came to see me on his own two feet. And then we exchanged our rings...

So the ring he had given to Wataru prior was his, while this one originally belonged to Yuichi. Ironically, they had returned to their old owners right around the same time.

Man, oh man...

Yuichi was filled with mixed feelings as he clenched his hand around the ring tightly. It was like God was telling them to start over from square one.

Falling in love, opening up, and deepening one's feelings while compromising bit by bit.

Then they had exchanged rings as proof that their mutual feelings were unwavering. Was this telling them to start that process all over again?

Wataru... What do you think?

They had parted ways this morning and Wataru should be back at his house by now. Yuichi called out to him in his mind and gave a long sigh.

"Eh? So you guys didn't just cancel the lease? You completely called off living together?"

Masaaki spoke in total surprise over the phone.

While Masanobu was meeting up with Yuichi, Masaaki had a lot of time on his hands and nothing to do with it, so he called Wataru from the airport. When he

told Wataru during the conversation to tell him his new address when he moved, Wataru told him that he had no such plans for the time being, which made Masaaki seem incredibly shocked.

"That's a hell of a choice to make. You didn't get in a fight or anything, did you?"

"Not at all. Kazuki and I discussed what we really wanted, and we concluded that there was no need to rush. It would have been okay to rush into living together in the confusion of the moment, but if I had more time, I could save money to handle expenses. That way we can do things without pushing ourselves more than necessary."

"I don't really follow your logic. If you like each other, shouldn't you be together 24/7?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

The simple statement brought an unconscious wrysmile to Wataru's face. Masaaki was right, but Wataru had taken it as a good opportunity to consider things in a forward-thinking way. Househunting with Yuichi and working part-time to pay for moving expenses, all of that was fresh and worth doing to Wataru. He looked forward to doing everything he had put off during his exam studies, all the plans and discussions about their new life.

"It's hard to explain, but starting something new with Kazuki, I want to take everything one step at a time. Enjoying ourselves, sometimes fighting amongst ourselves, but always at the pace that suits us."

"The pace that suits you guys, huh... Well, it's none of my business. If it makes you two happy, it's not

my place to butt in. It'll take time for you guys to make wedding preparations, huh?"

"Er, that's not what I..."

He gave a rough impression to others, but he was worried in his own way, even if he could stand to watch his mouth, Wataru thought to himself. Masaaki spoke again in an unexpectedly serious tone.

"... Uh, hey. This is out of the blue, but actually..."

"What is it?"

"Well, uh, your sister..."

"Karin? What about her?"

Wataru got a bad feeling and played dumb in his response. Masaaki had started to sound disinterested, but now he spoke more quickly as though bracing himself for something.

"Give her my email address and my phone number! She can contact me if she likes!"

"... Is that an order?"

"Ah! No, it's a favor... Please."

"Email and phone number, huh..."

He had blurted it out in a clumsy way, but it was kind of cute. Even so, Wataru was somewhat reluctant to introduce his sister to someone that would be living a long distance away. Whatever he thought of Masaaki's overblown brother complex, he was still Masanobu's younger brother and had a nice face, and he was smart enough to skip grades and advance into college in the U.S. Those were all favorable characteristics for a boyfriend, but if they found themselves getting too serious, it would cause trouble.

If Karin felt that way and told me she was going to America when she graduated high school...

Wataru had endured a lot at the hands of Masaaki's brother complex, but now the tables had turned and Wataru was demonstrating a sister complex of his own. Wataru made a show of seeming pensive in response, and Masaaki pleaded more with him in a teary voice.

"I'm not, like... trying to hit on her right away or anything. I guess I just don't want her to forget about me. I'm free right now, so I'm not two-timing either."

"Of course not!"

"Sorry, geez. I just worded that poorly, don't get angry. I'll tell you something nice in return."

"Something nice?"

Wataru admired his shrewdness in making it a conditional exchange. It wasn't bad for his sister to be popular, but she had thrown herself fully into studying engraving lately, and it was possible that she simply wasn't all that interested in romance. Wataru blithely figured that he'd like to hear what this nice thing was.

"What's this nice thing? It better not be you telling me that you'll be back in two weeks with Asaka. Knock it off when you're going on about how hard it is to part."

"You're showing some backbone now, considering how dejected you were when Kazuki was out of the country. Well, whatever. Truth is, Shohei might come to New York next month."

"Shohei? How come?"

"I only heard bits and pieces of my brother's

side of the conversation, but it sounds like some kind of business trip.”

“I see...”

There was precedent for Shohei leaving his daughter Takako with Yuichi and going on a business trip to the U.S. with his wife. It certainly wasn't unheard of. But Wataru had no idea what made that a nice thing to tell him.

“What are you talking about? He's your nemesis of course. Isn't it prudent to know your enemy's movements?”

“Enemy... yeah, I guess he might be.”

“Man, you're not even into this.”

“... Guess not. But thanks anyway. As a token of gratitude, I'll give proactive consideration to the Karin issue. You might get contacted when I remember so take care.”

“What do you mean, consideration?!”

Masaaki sounded indignant, and Wataru laughed it off and promptly hung up. He was afraid that if he kept chatting any longer he'd give in and ask how Asaka and Kazuki were doing. But knowing that wouldn't help him any, and the best way to avoid trouble was to have nothing to do with their relationship.

For people so smart, they sure are taking a while...

The wall calendar to the side of his desk had a red circle on the day one week from now. Wataru looked at the date and murmured to himself, “The graduation ceremony, huh...”

So much has happened, spring isn't shaping up

the way I expected it to.

He should have been making preparations to move by now. He'd see Yuichi like he did every day and argue and laugh with him about things like furniture placement and rules for their new lifestyle.

But... we both amicably agreed to postpone that. It's a little lonely, but this time there won't be any holding back or self-restraint.

After the graduation ceremony, he had made arrangements to meet with Yuichi alone. Yuichi said to have all the fun he wanted in celebration of passing, that on that day he would indulge whatever Wataru wanted. There would be no causes for anxiety. They could go back to the easygoing days they had before. If Wataru called, he would hear Yuichi's voice right away within reasonable bounds, and if he wanted to see him, he could go see him without a care. Truly a daily life with an incredible luxury.

Kazuki...

If there was one thing casting a tiny shadow over all of this?

It was just their rings not being able to find their destination.

Masanobu was rather surprised at the change in Kazuki's demeanor after returning the ring to him.

"Ah, Kazuki? You put me in a bind when you go silent so suddenly. If there is some problem..."

"There sure is. Damn it, what kind of test is this? Am I being tested by fate?"

"Tested...?"

Masanobu was bewildered as to what Yuichi

was talking about as he spat that phrase through his lips. But in an anticlimactic move, Yuichi just muttered to himself coolly.

"Yeah, that might be it."

"I feel like I've also been dragged into this, but for the moment I think I've overcome my own issues. So next time, I'm sure it'll be your turn. Or rather, I should say, you and Wataru's turn."

"Mine and Wataru's...?"

Yuichi looked back in surprise at Masanobu's serious gaze.

"What do you mean by that? Are you saying Wataru and I still lack something?"

"I shouldn't need to point it out. Shouldn't you already be aware of it, Kazuki?"

Masanobu's words touched a nerve and Yuichi fell silent, but Masanobu continued speaking without holding back.

"To tell the truth, I expected you to come back right away. It's been almost two weeks now since Wataru dumped me. Whatever you had going on, I at least expected you to come flying right back as soon as you heard about it from him. But you didn't."

"That was..."

Masanobu had no way of knowing that was when his own unfortunate accident had landed him in the hospital. Yuichi started to say that, but quickly shut his mouth. Excuses were poor form, and it wouldn't change the fact that he had made Wataru cry.

"I know, Kazuki. You were injured, right?"

"Eh?"

"The bandages on your left hand are still fresh, aren't they?"

"....."

"You were depending on his indulgence at some point, weren't you?"

Masanobu pointed this out with a smile, and Yuichi couldn't even think up a good retort. Masanobu was right that on some level, Yuichi had underestimated the reality of the situation. He would have to bury the mistake that had caused his dependence on Wataru's indulgence, that Wataru would surely wait for him, that he could get in touch any time he wanted.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not using that as an excuse to criticize you. Part of the reason you held off on returning is with me. Even still... I can't help but want to know why. I'm sure that my being that way hurt Wataru even more. So to be perfectly honest with you, I'm relieved today."

"Relieved?"

"Yes. When I brought up the ring over the phone, didn't you take action right away? It was like you'd been waiting for a pretext to fly back. Even if it only made a day's difference, you still insisted on getting back as soon as possible rather than waiting in New York. Hearing that put me at ease."

You've got no reason to be at ease, Yuichi thought to himself, but he had stopped the childish retorts. He was the one that had made the mistake, and Masanobu wasn't exactly criticizing him.

Changing... huh.

Yuichi took a deep breath and looked around at

their surroundings at length.

A boarding announcement, unhurried people going to and fro. As he felt the old, familiar atmosphere of energy in a space where time flowed at a dizzying pace, he remembered the day he had flown from here to New York, as if it was an illusion.

I left Wataru and left the country to go by myself... Being away from everyday life might have made me realize that at some point I'd come to a stop...

Wataru was probably the same. His exams were done with, and there was no doubt that his field of vision had broadened.

The question was, what kind of fortune would that bring them?

"Say, Asaka. I really don't want to discuss this with you, but..."

"Yes?"

"I love Wataru. I realized that all over again when I was separated from him."

"....."

This was not a declaration of hostility like before. It was a statement of his feelings as they were with all bluffing and posturing removed. That touched a nerve in Masanobu more strongly than expected, and for the first time he got a pained twinge in his eyes.

"I'm not sure why you're telling me this..."

"What's with that face? Didn't you come here to tell me all that other stuff? This is the last we'll see of each other, so let me say my piece. I love Wataru, and I wanted to have him to myself as quickly as I could, even a day sooner."

"... Yes, yes, I get that. And?"

"But it wasn't that easy in reality with all the things pressing down on us like you and our own trials, my brother being the worst. All we could rely on were our own feelings of love and trust. But we're not made to be able to turn every problem into something more positive."

"Kazuki..."

Yuichi wasn't talking with any expectation of getting agreement. He continued to speak on his own initiative. He heard a half-disgusted sigh next to him and chose to ignore it. If he didn't put his feelings to words here, he felt that he would always harbor ill will toward Masanobu.

"I think that both Wataru and I started holding back and restraining ourselves more and more. To tell the truth, when you kissed Wataru in that post office under pending renovation, I wanted to run up and punch you. When my brother said he would turn against us, I didn't declare direct hostility toward him. I tiptoed around the issue and avoided it. Wataru was doing the same. I don't think he really wanted to let me go to New York."

"But... Neither of you ever chose any of those things."

"Yeah."

Yuichi nodded firmly to Masanobu's words and lifted his gaze confidently.

"I was always looking beyond. If Wataru and I are going to share our future, I can't run from the problems right before me. I came to believe I should

consider what I could do for us instead of giving in to temporary emotions. I was sure that wasn't wrong."

"But by the time you noticed, your foundation was shaking?"

"Exactly. By pushing myself so much and looking only at what lay beyond, I was putting the cart before the horse. Reasoning and eloquence alone can't keep a romance alive. I felt that for myself just now."

"....."

"You were one step ahead of me because you learned that back when you lost your lover. That was why you told us from the get-go that our love was too unstable and did all sorts of meddling. At the time I found it irritating, but now I can finally be grateful for it."

"Grateful, huh..."

Masanobu responded with an exaggerated sigh of exasperation. It was understandable. Getting a show of gratitude from his rival was akin to pulling the rug right out from under him. As Masanobu gave him a resentful look that made it apparent he found this to be the worst form of revenge, Yuichi came to the unexpected realization that he had his opponent cornered.

"I guess I caught Wataru's airheadedness."

"Now look, Kazuki. This is no time to talk that carelessly."

Masanobu promptly launched into a counterattack, unamused.

"Assuming what you said is true, the real problem will be what comes next. After all, whatever else the case may be, you won't have clearly visible

enemies like myself and Shohei. For all that you love your partner, the stresses you've built up will cause misunderstandings. Won't that create even more tangled situations than just sour feelings?"

"Even so, I won't give up on Wataru," Yuichi responded assertively and placed the ring back in its envelope. He decided in his mind that the next time he would remove this ring would be to put it directly back on Wataru's finger. Surely Wataru had the same thing in mind for the ring Yuichi had entrusted to him.

"I'm not the man I was before. I won't give up before we find our answer. My desire to live together with Wataru won't change. So... Asaka."

"Eh?"

"Sorry, but after this I won't allow you to lay a finger on Wataru."

"....."

Wataru looked straight at Masanobu with an invincible gaze that seemed to go right through him.

"I never wanted to admit it before now, but we do resemble each other. So I know you're not the kind of guy who gives up easily. But no matter how you keep feeling about him, as long as I am at Wataru's side, I won't let anyone else have him."

"You... look serious."

"Because shallow cleverness doesn't get me anywhere with you."

Yuichi's expression grew abruptly calm, and he slowly rose to his feet. He stuck the envelope in his jacket and smiled brazenly down at Masanobu.

"It's getting close to time. Go on, get going."

"Of course, I don't need you telling me that. I've got no regrets now, anyway."

Masanobu rose quickly to his own feet and narrowed his eyes in an undaunted glare back at Yuichi. His finely sculpted features showed faint signs of fighting spirit for the first time. Having managed to avoid a confrontation, he looked like a completely different person.

"I suppose Shohei was wrong, just this once."

"About what?"

"I was just thinking that even a man that smart can make naive judgments when it comes to his younger brother. Or maybe you're growing up so fast that you've outpaced his judgments."

"Huh?"

He had no idea what Masanobu was talking about, but just hearing Shohei's name come up was enough to make Yuichi's brows crease instinctively. Seeing this, Masanobu gave him a pointed silence in response before speaking up again.

"Kazuki, you're as clever as ever."

"....."

"And you're a fool. You've stirred me up this time. As you said, I have a hard time giving up. And it wouldn't be fun to hang my head in defeat, would it?"

"Wh..."

Masanobu picked up his satchel in his right hand and tossed Yuichi a dazzlingly graceful smile.

"You'd best not forget that I'll keep caring for Wataru. After all, I'm a hero of justice when it comes to him. If anything happens to him, I'll be there to save

him even if it means shoving you aside to do it."

"You..."

"Even to the ends of the earth."

With that final poisoned parting shot, Masanobu turned his back to Yuichi and walked off toward the international departure gate.

"Welcome."

He stepped into the high-ceilinged restaurant interior and heard light voices all around. The open cafe was in an alley off a main road lined with brand-name shops, and it had opened all of its closed terrace seating in conjunction with the season having grown pleasant.

"Hey, Wataru. This is a special occasion. Let's go to the terrace."

"Isn't it still cold, though? Whatever the weather is, it's still March."

"Good young men shouldn't complain about little things. C'mon."

The cheerful Kawamura nudged him from behind, and Wataru grudgingly picked out the table closest to the store side in the terrace seating. Yuichi worked part-time at this cafe and they came here frequently, but they had always been shown to seating way in the back of the restaurant, so this was their first time having tea outside the store that seemed to hide something.

"Have you decided on your order?"

They took a seat, and a waiter came to take their order in a calm and composed voice. When he did, the female customers at surrounding tables looked their way

as one. And that wasn't just from one direction, but from all over the cafe. Wataru scrunched up his face and hid behind a menu, ordering a cafe au lait in a sullen tone.

"Cafe au lait again? You must have a one-track mind."

"Shut up. Are you even allowed to talk to customers that way?"

"Heh. Sounds like you've gotten a bad attitude of your own."

Yuichi stopped writing on the order slip and smirked down at him. Wataru faltered at that, and Kawamura raised his right hand in surrender to smooth things over.

"Okay, okay! I'll have a mocha cappuccino! With extra cream and powdered cinnamon!"

"This isn't a Seattle-style coffeehouse, you know."

"Fine, then whatever's close to that!"

"... Very good, sir."

Wataru admired how good Kawamura had gotten at rolling with the punches. Before, if Yuichi gave him so much as a cold glare, he'd hang his head like a lost puppy. He was acting powerful today, and there was a reason for it.

"Heh heh. After this, I'm going out on a date with Mitsuki. I don't think it'd be exaggerating to say we're going out now. I mean, this is our third date, right?"

"They say the third time is the crossroads, though."

"Eh?"

"K-Kazuki!"

As if in payback for earlier, Yuichi muttered this ominous prediction from behind Kawamura as he walked up with the cappuccino and cafe au lait in each hand. Kawamura abruptly turned anxious and Wataru hastened to smooth it over. Yuichi watched this while biting back a smile. He had a much softer expression than back when they had first met and he would tease Wataru with sarcastic or cynical comments.

"It's okay, this one's my treat. Keep at it, Kawamura. Naruse's pretty strong-hearted, you know."

"I... I concur..."

"You're joining our club, right? Since you're doing that already, would you mind inviting some people from the same college? This year I want to work on some projects on a slightly larger scale, but I don't have the manpower for it."

"I... I'll do my best." Kawamura nodded eagerly, seemingly afraid that if he said the wrong thing his love would be shattered. The feeling of tension between his best friend and his lover made Wataru tired.

Man, and this is even after Yuichi started saying his name right. Still... It's so peaceful now, like none of my worries were real.

Yesterday, Masanobu had departed for New York.

Wataru hadn't asked what kind of talk Yuichi had had with him at Narita. Yuichi had called him up after seeing Masanobu off and invited him out to dinner once he got back.

"I'm really well-rested, so I got right back to work. If you're free, come by and hang out."

When Wataru asked if his injured left hand was okay, the response he'd gotten was that Yuichi was keeping his work within a reasonable scope at the storefront, so to come on by. It seemed that the store figured he'd be good at drawing customers with his looks.

"Welcome back, Kazuki."

"I'm home."

Wataru had met him at the closest station on his way back. Grocery shopping together with him and just being able to have a perfectly normal conversation gave Wataru an incomparable sense of happiness. It really was just like before. Strong feelings filled Wataru's heart, eagerness that he could spend as much time as he wanted with Yuichi without having to worry about time grades, assignments or rankings.

When they'd first gone out, his partner had been a cram student, and the following year he had exam cramming of his own. Now that they were fast approaching the two year mark, they could finally be together with nothing holding them down. He wanted to treasure this time, and he felt like they could start with a new beginning.

"Where's your friend? He ran off for his date already?"

"Ages ago. He chugged that cappuccino like it was a beer and made a huge fuss when he scalded his tongue. I hope he'll be okay being that out of it."

Yuichi had removed his apron, perhaps because he was on break, and he brought a coffee for himself in his right hand. Despite the customers casting amorous

glances at him to the point of it becoming commonplace, the man himself was the very picture of calm.

"Kazuki, say, uh..."

"The ring, right?"

"... Yeah."

Of course Yuichi also knew. Yesterday they'd had a hard time bringing up the subject, and they hadn't discussed the rings openly. Yuichi's ring was still entrusted with Wataru and Wataru could give it back any time, but he simply couldn't bring himself to do that.

"Come to think of it, it's a strange connection." Yuichi brought it up in a surprisingly calm tone. "At first, I picked up the ring you dropped. That's where it all began."

"Yeah. You left it on my desk quietly. When I found it, I was really happy."

"If I'd returned it to you directly back then, I might not be sitting here drinking tea with you today. Wataru, you don't smile much in first meetings, do you?"

"That's not true."

After a smiling denial, Wataru glanced surreptitiously around himself. Yuichi leaned forward and asked what was up in response to his odd behavior, and their eyes met at a close distance. Wataru tipped his head toward Yuichi's ear and softly confessed to him in a lowered voice.

"I probably fell for you on the first day."

"H... Hey, now..."

Yuichi's cheeks reddened at that moment. His

complexion would never change even when approached by a beautiful woman, but that one comically delivered line had gotten to him. Wataru found himself surprised by the unexpected effectiveness of his lightly spoken words.

“... Yeesh, there’s a time and a place, you know.”

With damaged pride, Yuichi shot Wataru an annoyed glance and looked off to the side. Wataru apologized while laughing and Yuichi mostly calmed down, but when he spoke again, he still had a little smoldering flame in his eyes.

“You mind if I hold onto the ring for a little while?”

“.....”

Wataru had expected this, but it was so completely expected that he forgot to answer and just stared.

He had been thinking that Yuichi was sure to say that.

And that then he himself would nod to it.

“A lot has happened. I’ve reflected on things, had new realizations, remembered all over again how much I love you.. So many chemical changes are taking place, right here.”

Yuichi pointed to his chest with his right forefinger and spoke in a sincere tone.

“I came to a realization with all this. That I’m a fragile human being. But I don’t want to be. I don’t want to become the kind of man who acts stubborn and fakes being tough and narrows his world to you alone. The

same goes for these rings and their memories. I want to love you without it being tied to them.”

“Kazuki...”

“So I’d like you to wait just a little while.”

“... Okay.”

Wataru felt just the same. Even if he got it back at this point, he most likely wouldn’t be able to bring himself to put it on. That was how earnest he was about it.

“Does that bother you?”

“Not at all. My feelings won’t change with or without the rings.”

It was only natural, but putting it to words made it echo seriously within his heart. Yuichi smiled broadly and spoke as though he was giving away a valuable secret.

“I love you, Wataru.”

“Yeah... Me too...”

Their direct feelings gave off a pleasant atmosphere.

Even if the paths they walked were different, Wataru wanted to look in the same direction Yuichi did.

In that direction lay an eternity for them. The unchanging feelings Shohei asked him to show.

“I love you, Kazuki.” Wataru whispered once more to the left hand wrapped in bandages.

After that, his own left ring finger would also go bare, not relying on anything.

Wataru finished a part-time job interview and hastened down the road toward home. This was the

fifth day since Yuichi had returned and they'd made arrangements to meet to have dinner tonight, so Wataru would be heading out again as soon as he changed clothes. They had postponed moving in together, and there was also the relaxation from free enrollment and spring break. Ever since their reunion, they had been meeting up at least once a day.

... Even so, he is pretty busy with his job and the club.

Perhaps because Masanobu's transfer abroad had left the club with a sense of impending crisis, the club members were suddenly incredibly motivated. They had asked Shohei and gotten an increasing number of odd jobs and minor tasks.

Kazuki became one of the core members pretty much as soon as he got back. *He says things like, "I'll beat!" but keeps going with a ton of energy. I never would have pictured it at this time last year.*

Yuichi had led a spectacular high school life with grades among the top class in domestic mock exams and fine motor reflexes that let him serve as a pinch hitter on every school sports team, but he had never taken up a position on the student council. He would have been a sure pick if he'd taken up candidacy, but he'd always had the disposition of a lone wolf and didn't much care for being lumped in with others or herded around.

Yeah, even his participation in the renovation club started out as a temporary part-time job to pay for a trip to Okinawa. I was studying for exams and couldn't handle it myself, and that put all kinds of pressure on Kazuki...

But things would be different now. Wataru would also work hard at a job, and next time he would be the one to invite Yuichi on a vacation. Besides, he also intended to start saving money for the day he dreamed of when they would live together.

"I'm home. Karin, you around?"

"Listen, sorry, but I'm fine enough on my own! I'm busy!"

As Wataru opened the entryway door, an angry voice suddenly rang out. Wataru blinked in confusion, then saw Karin talking on and on harshly into her cell phone. She must have just gotten back from school because she hadn't changed out of her uniform. She kept pacing in circles like a stray dog, giving repeated curt responses to the person on the other end of the line as though they were being overly persistent. Wataru must have finally entered her field of vision, because she wordlessly thrust the cell phone in his direction.

"Here!"

"Wh-what?"

"It was you, wasn't it? You gave him my cell phone number! Take responsibility!"

"Ah, Masaaki, huh?"

It had totally slipped Wataru's mind that he had reluctantly given it out until she brought it up. But Karin's most recent meeting with Masaaki had apparently left her with an extremely poor impression, and she angrily stormed off into the living room.

"Eh? Hey, am I getting through? Hello? Helloooo?"

"If you mean Karin, she's gone."

"... Aw man, are you an evil spirit or something?"

"I told you to stop using that phrase!"

Man, why do people around me always make up things to call me? Wataru grumbled in irritation and found himself heaving a deep sigh, surprisingly crestfallen.

"I, uh, think your little sister really hates me man."

"What were you expecting? She's mad at you for being so rude."

"Does she have a brother complex or something? Do normal people get that mad?"

"....."

You've got no room to talk, Wataru started to say, but barely managed to swallow it with a wry smile. Claiming Karin's heart would take a considerable amount of time and energy. Even without that issue, most of her free time was spent on studying her dream, engraving.

Didn't she say that one day when she got good at it, she'd make Kazuki and I new rings?

His ring finger was still bare, and the ring he had been entrusted with was still sitting on his desk. Yuichi for his part hadn't yet removed his bandages, so he certainly wasn't putting on any rings, and what he did with the ring Masanobu had returned to him remained unclear.

"Wataru? Are you listening?"

"Huh?"

Wataru hastily snapped out of it with the sudden interruption of his reflections.

"Sorry, what were we talking about again?"

"What I was saying was, Shohei's coming here next week. His schedule got moved up, apparently."

"Oh yeah, he was talking about setting out or something. So, are you worried that he might persuade Asaka? Don't worry, he doesn't bend his will that easily."

"Nah, I'm not worried about that anymore. I settled things in my own way."

Wataru was a little surprised to hear Masaaki dismiss the question so readily. Up until now, Masaaki had constantly gotten carried away and badmouthed Shohei eagerly. Wataru started to suspect what might be behind this, then Masaaki followed up with a voice filled with confidence.

"After all, somebody loves me. What a great thing words are. Just one line and the whole world changes."

"Wh... What are you talking about?"

"The fact that you don't need to worry about my brother anymore."

"Eh...?"

"I figured it out. I don't have to make a scene around people. He's the type that can seize happiness for himself. Before he left Japan, he said to me, 'You're my brother, so I'll tell you this,' and he told me the secret of a lifetime. I'm someone my brother holds in high esteem. Once I realized that, I stopped getting worked up about you and Shohei both."

"....."

With his bragging, Wataru could practically see

Masaaki's boasting expression over the phone. He had no idea what the secret of a lifetime would be, but it must have been something that moved Masaaki deeply. Wataru let out a breath of relief, glad for him, and a smile unknowingly crept up on his face.

"So, when Shohei flies back, he'll be flying with my brother, and I was figuring why not join 'em for the ride? That way we could go back to New York together again."

"Huh? Didn't you just get back?"

Wataru's admiration was fleeting, and his voice did a 180 without realizing it, unable to believe his ears.

"Don't tell me that's what Karin was angry about..."

"Man, I ask her if she'll go out with me when I come back and she goes all, 'I'm fine enough on my own'! Geez."

"That explains it."

It was mean to Masaaki, but Wataru felt a powerful urge to laugh. Masaaki wasn't likely to get discouraged. He'd show up at the house to visit and approach Karin regardless of her anger. The rest all hinged on whose patience would run out first. That would be the crossroads of fate.

"Man, you suck. What's with the snickering?"

"Sorry," Wataru apologized to the sullen Masaaki while trying desperately to bite back his laughter.

When Wataru got off the phone and peeked into the living room to return it, he didn't see Karin. He

walked up to the second floor to see if she'd gone to her room, and she was waiting for him on the second floor with her arms folded.

"... Don't be so mad. Masaaki's got his good points."

"Hey, aren't you the one he humiliated? Besides, I'm busy. I don't have any time for a long-distance relationship. I'm in my third year and I've got exams coming up, too."

"Oh? You aren't going to an affiliated university?"

"That's right." She followed Wataru into his room and sat on his bed like she owned it. She went to a private girls' high school known as a "rich girls" school, and Wataru had figured that she would progress to college automatically in a private school "Escalator" system.

"I'll tell this especially to you, Wataru. I want to go to an arts college."

"A-An arts college? Is this because of the engraving?"

"Yes. I'm getting advice from Toko right now. So when it comes time to persuade Mom and Dad, make sure to back me up, okay? I'll probably have to go through prep school or something too."

"Ahh... Sure, I'll cheer you on, so do your best."

Wataru firmly accepted, and Karin shrugged her shoulders as if embarrassed. Wataru had thought she was strongly into engraving before, but it had gone beyond a simple hobby into a purpose in life. Wataru

was as happy for her as though it was him.

Kazuki and Asaka are into architecture, and Karin's into engraving, huh... Everyone's finding their future goals.

So what would he do?

Wataru looked back at himself and considered it. He had cleared the goal right in front of him, his exams, but that was nothing more than the first step toward his future. He couldn't distinctly make out the scene that he should be seeing beyond that. It was as though it was clouded.

It'd be pathetic if I fell behind my little sister. I've got even more I need to think over.

As he continued to reflect to himself, Karin interjected her voice.

"Say Wataru, do you remember? The promise I made to make you and Kazuki matching rings?"

"Of course I do, though I'm not in any rush."

"But you haven't worn your current ring in ages."

"Er..."

"You don't seem to have gotten in any fights, so why? Are you tired of it? Or did your tastes change? I guess Kazuki's not wearing his either?"

Women were truly perceptive. She saw where there was something to see. Wataru got barraged with rapid questions as he tried to consider an appropriate response, and he finally gave a long, defeated sigh.

"Looks like I stepped on a land mine," Karin said shyly and offered an encouraging smile. "Well, it's okay to give the rings a little break too, I guess."

"A break?"

"I don't know why you're not wearing them, but items are tied to people's hearts. Especially accessories that you literally wear. Maybe at some point they stop serving a purpose? I help out at Toko's shop every now and then, and I see all kinds of customers that make me think that."

"....."

"When you feel like you've grown too dependent, it's important to separate a little and cool off. Remember, you don't love him because you have the ring. You wear the ring because you love him."

Karin's simple statement was like a splash of water to Wataru's face that made him freeze in place. Countless ripples shook his heart as though from a pebble splashing into a surface of water.

Yeah... She's right. That's why Kazuki said to wait for him.

Wataru had been appalled when the ring was returned to him, and he had fallen into an anxiety like it could be the end of the world, but the truth was that that had been for infuriatingly simple and egotistical reasons. It had simply been because there were differences in the mutual feelings and interpretations they projected onto their rings. He couldn't deny that the situation and timing had been incredibly poor, but Wataru had been deeply wounded when there had been no need for him to be wounded at all.

Yuichi must have reflected on that and felt a sense of urgency. They should have learned once before not to worry about forms, but they both grew anxious

while apart and came to depend more strongly on the respective rings. Yuichi wanted time to reset that.

I knew that somewhere inside. That's why I nodded so readily.

When Yuichi had asked him in the cafe whether he worked part-time if he could keep the ring for a little while, it had felt like part of a perfectly natural flow. That was what let Wataru accede without hesitation and look forward to the day when they could wear them again. Whether that day came tomorrow or ten years down the road, as long as Yuichi was at his side an invisible bond would tie their ring fingers, and those feelings would never slumber.

"Eww. Don't grin to yourself like that, it's gross."

"H-Hey, is that any way to address your brother?"

"Aww. I'd been considering moving into your room once you moved out. It's sunnier and bigger than my room. Tch."

"... Well, excuse me."

Whatever the reasons were, postponing the living together and removing their rings might have made it look to outsiders like things weren't going well between him and Yuichi. But Wataru was very grateful for Karin's sense of distance, neither avoiding him nor stepping in too seriously.

"Oh, right. I won't need dinner tonight. I'm meeting up with Kazuki."

"I bet you'll be spending the night after that anyway. It must be so nice being lovebirds! Maybe

ould reconsider too. He had a decent face, and he was pretty tall and cool-looking..."

"Hey, Karin!"

Wataru asked in consternation if she was serious. Karin got a playful look and laughed as she said, "Wouldn't you like to know!"

"You really have a sister complex, you know."

Those were the first exasperated words out of Yuichi's mouth. Wataru gave him a sulking glare as he puffed his face with Jibun-style chicken that Yuichi had made. But his expression hardly lasted a few seconds before being melted away by the delicious flavor of the meat melting in his mouth.

"This is fantastic. Kazuki, you really can do anything, huh? You've gotten way better at cooking since you started living alone. How can you replicate a meal so well just from seeing a recipe?"

"... It'd be way harder to make something different."

"Oh yeah? Well, my bamboo shoot miso soup is pretty good too. I learned that from Karin."

"Yeah, it's really good for something you make with mixing store-bought boiled bamboo, dashi, and miso and hot water."

"You're mean..."

Wataru pouted once more at the friendly teasing. He was disappointed that the first impression Yuichi had given him from hearing about Masaaki calling Karin this morning and Wataru talking with him was that Wataru had a sister complex.

"Still, I'm impressed with Karin, having such a clearly defined goal. When I was in my second year of high school, I couldn't come up with anything I wanted to do in the future."

"Yeah? You had that problem too, Kazuki? I'm kind of surprised."

"I told you before, my brother has an intense presence. I felt like if I couldn't surpass him, any job was as good as another. That said, I couldn't live my life imitating him."

"Kazuki..."

Wataru found himself at a loss for what to say while listening to him.

Yuichi, having thought that way, had a same sex lover and now led a unique life that wasn't likely to cause trouble for Shohei or others. He had overcome his complex toward his brother and even decided to work in a field similar to Shohei's.

Meanwhile, Shohei lived a carefree life but now he'd settled down with a wife and kids.

Perhaps to Shohei, the biggest adventure of all was a normal life. Come to think of it, Wataru had heard that the one who had gotten him to embark on that adventure, his beloved wife Kirie, had an eroding physical condition, but had there been any particular abnormalities?

"From Sis? Not that I've heard."

"Yeah? Well, if you haven't heard anything... I guess she must be doing okay."

Shohei had said he hadn't told anyone else, and indeed, Yuichi knew nothing about it. But surely if

relative was sick, they'd at least get in touch?

"I am a little worried, though. I'll give him a call sometime tomorrow. I should pay my respects to Akako too. Can you come with me when I go? She gets snooty when you don't come."

"Sure, but I interviewed for a part-time job today, so I won't be able to do that indefinitely."

"A part-time job? Where?"

"The video rental store near M-U. It's easy to get to, and I'd be working with Kawamura."

"You guys want to stay joined at the hip even when you go to different colleges, huh?"

Yuichi sipped his miso soup with a flat expression. There was no great bond holding Wataru and Kawamura together, but Yuichi still didn't seem to care for it much. Even without that part, as Mitsuki had teased him about the other day, whenever anyone at the renovation club was a little too friendly he would give them a cold glare of displeasure, so Wataru couldn't even go to calm work to hang out. He was expecting things to get better without Masanobu around, but so far it seemed more or less the same.

"Oh, yeah. Kazuki, two days after tomorrow is my graduation ceremony. You remember, right?"

After finishing cleanup from dinner and drying the shower, Wataru returned to the living room and pointed to the desktop calendar.

"Of course," Yuichi responded firmly as he handed over Wataru's freshly cleaned pajamas after having already changed clothes himself.

"I've reserved that day off with my job and

the club. I should ask you, are you okay ignoring your friends and parents? High school graduations are a once in a lifetime thing."

"That's all the more reason."

"Eh?"

"If it's once in a lifetime, I want to be congratulated by you," Wataru responded in the middle of pulling off his shirt.

"You're so awfully direct sometimes," Yuichi replied in admiration. They had arrangements to meet up after the graduation ceremony if it went off without a hitch, but Wataru had left what they'd do after that up to Yuichi, so Wataru would have no idea what kind of celebrations were coming until the day of graduation.

"Still, going out of your way to remind me. Don't you trust me?"

"Th-That's not it. I'm looking forward to what you have planned. You just seem pretty busy, so I thought it was worth asking just in case."

"Don't worry. I'll give you a proper celebration."

"You'd better," Wataru replied cheerfully with a wry smile and a thought that he didn't have to say it so highhandedly.

Kinda reminds me of last year's graduation ceremony...

Their positions had been reversed, but he had gotten to spend spring together with Yuichi that way again. That just simply made him happy. And this year they had promised not to hold anything back anymore.

"Kazuki... Why...?"

Last year, Wataru had been a student sad over parting with Yuichi, and he had feared going into a panic. He secretly slipped out of school and left without a word. After all, if he had been there, Yuichi would have given him his attention, and he wouldn't have been able to speak at length with his teachers or classmates. He consoled himself with the thought that he would at least let the others have him a little at the end of their time together, as he walked back.

Then, around the curve of a road with cherry blossoms in early bloom awaited Yuichi.

"That really threw me for a loop. I thought I was seeing things."

"Don't you have any appreciation for romantic ideas?"

Yuichi grabbed Wataru's wrist in exasperation and pulled him lightly in toward himself. He was sitting on the bed, and Wataru fell into his lap while still only half-changed.

"Whoa, watch it. I'm still changing..."

"You'll take it off anyway, what's the difference?"

"Now, look..."

What kind of dirty old man are you, Wataru started to say, but he couldn't even form the words in the face of Yuichi's graceful and sharp good looks. When the term "elder" got brought up, it brought Shohei to mind since he was already a father, and Wataru was all too glad to silently snub the elder brother in favor of the younger.

"What's with the discontented look?" Yuichi

looked down on him with an arrogant smile.

"You think I'd be happy?" Wataru spat back at the face he never grew tired of looking at. "For one thing, if you're going to prepare pajamas for me, you could at least bring them to the dressing room."

"Don't be so spoiled. You think you're a prince now?"

"You could just say to spend the night."

"Cut it out with the little gripes."

When Wataru glared back with a comment that he would make a great tyrant himself, Yuichi finally lost patience and his lips descended. He melted away Wataru's complaints in an especially sweet kiss, as though trying to cut short the clumsy conversation.

Graduation in three days... huh...

Let me press you down, Wataru murmured urgently as he embraced both hands around Yuichi's back.

No matter how many seasons passed, from this point forward they would never spend spring like this again. This year's spring would be the last they could spend in the place where they met and fell in love.

"Remember, you don't love him because you have the ring. You wear the ring because you love him."

Just before those beloved fingers threw him into disarray, Karin's words abruptly passed through the back of Wataru's mind.

"Something's out of whack, man."

Kawamura looked squeamishly at the chicken sandwich in his hand as he sat at the hamburger joint

where they had met up. Wataru had come directly from Yuichi's rental house, and as he set down his soft drink, he gave Kawamura a suspicious look with an impatient expression.

"Hurry up and ask your question."

"What the heck, Wataru? Don't you want to hear the rest?"

"Come on. When you try to dance around the subject like that, it's pretty much always something."

"You sure you want to throw that stone? You've got Yuichi Kazuki to hide, don't you?"

"I'm not hiding him."

"Quiet, you."

With that lame retort, Kawamura started in on his chicken sandwich. As Wataru thought to himself that maybe Kawamura should be the one to talk, Kawamura's cell phone suddenly rang.

Hmm, must be Mitsuki. Looks like things are going smoothly for them.

Wataru watched Kawamura gleefully answer the phone with envy, then his gaze shifted quietly to the sidewalk. Starting this spring he was finally going to become a formal member of the renovation club, and he seemed pretty excited about it.

According to Kazuki, even with Asaka gone they're doing a lot.

He heard from Yuichi about the club from time to time, and it sounded like Masanobu had left a considerable gap to fill. If Yuichi was recognizing that so readily, the reality must have been even worse.

"Sorry, Wataru. We were in the middle of

talking, weren't we?"

"It's fine, we can talk anytime. You've finally gotten a girlfriend, right?"

"You can leave out the 'finally' part, geez! Well, honestly, it's closer to something that's more than friends and less than lovers. I think we're getting a good mood building, though. One more thing to apologize for, I've got to go soon."

"What is it, a date? What happened to manly friendship, man?"

When Wataru mixed in a joke as a friendly ribbing, Kawamura's expression suddenly grew serious. Wataru was taken aback and curious as to what it could be.

"The truth is..."

With that lead-in, Kawamura gave Wataru a rundown of the "emergency situation" that Wataru had just now heard about.

"Shohei has given us a referral for work on a private residence. The foundation work was finished professionally as usual. The interior design and the finishing touches and the display... Everyone's working as assistants to the craftsmen, doing minor tasks for those things based on the design contracted through Shohei's office."

"Yeah, I know about that. I heard about it from Kazuki. What was it? Some calligrapher wanting to use it for a studio? And being really finicky in their requests and asking for all kinds of little details in their order?"

"You got it..."

Kawamura gave a sigh with a pained expression.

on his face. That right there made him a full member of the club. Kawamura was ever so slightly chagrined that at first Wataru had frequented the club more often, but that at some point Kawamura had been stuck in the lead.

“Well? Was there a problem at the work site?”

“Yeah. I just got a call from Mitsuki. Apparently the work they were scheduled to bring in hasn’t come back yet. The schedule’s supposed to have them hanging things tonight, then have the client check it all out tomorrow.”

“Hasn’t come back?” Wataru parroted back, wondering what that meant. Kawamura was for his part also hesitant to say whether it was that dire of a situation. But when Wataru waited patiently for an answer, Kawamura instead lowered his voice a level and continued on.

“You’re kind of related, so what the hey. The truth is, the framer that the client prefers is in Kyoto, and the client’s work got sent there to get framed. Those were scheduled to be returned from there today, but we haven’t been able to get in touch with the club member in charge of transport.”

“So they’re missing, and they still have the work?”

“Yeah.”

If by some chance a club member damaged or lost the work, all future activities would be thrown into peril. That was why it was an emergency situation, Kawamura said with a clouded expression. The calligrapher was an up and coming one in the scene that

had started to enjoy a lot of attention, and this studio was already scheduled to host a reception party. The invitations already mentioned the work that was meant to arrive today, so it would be a letdown if it wasn't on the wall at the reception.

"But why would something this valuable be getting transported by club members anyway?"

"You can say that, but it still beats jewelry or cash, right? Shohei's office is short-staffed with Asaka gone... Maybe they thought it'd be okay if it was just picking it up from the framer and bringing it back to Tokyo?"

"So, who is the member that you can't contact?"

It didn't sound like he could offer much help just from hearing the situation, but Wataru figured he'd ask anyway. For some reason, Kawamura's expression fell further. After an awkward pause, he blurted it out.

"... Kobayashi."

"Eh? You mean, THAT Kobayashi?"

"Yes. The one who gets in arguments with Kazuki with terms like 'obnoxious,' the one who observed you and Asaka hugging, the one who went further and told Kazuki directly about it in an email without the slightest hint of spite, the one who took my excuse of that being just a hug and not a love scene seriously, the one who blurts out comments like, 'Definitely a girl who's traveled abroad.' That Kobayashi."

"....."

Wataru got the impression that it wouldn't be odd if he got into some kind of trouble, and his reaction was silent. At that, Kawamura responded weakly with

a defeated smile. Undoubtedly the rest of the club was feeling the same way.

That was all the more reason not to wait around. It was already past 3 in the afternoon, and even if the work safely arrived at this point, hanging it up would likely become an all-nighter job.

"According to the schedule, they were supposed to arrive at 1 p.m."

"Yeah? So what could he be doing for two hours, and where?"

"Who knows? I'm just going to head to the work site. He definitely left the framer's, but his phone's not picking up. Kobayashi's pretty airheaded and misses things."

As Kawamura apologized and hurriedly started off, Wataru called out to him.

"I'll join you. Maybe I can lend a hand with something."

"Wataru..."

"Besides, you were in the middle of your talk before. The thing about Yuichi Kazuki."

"Ah, that was..."

"Right? Make sure to fill me in later."

Wataru spoke lightly to relax his friend's tension even a little, then started walking.

"Let's go."

Kawamura showed him to a neighborhood around thirty minutes away by train. It was a traditional upscale part of town filled with private residences renovated into shops and cafes, a currently popular

trend. The studio being worked on now was slated to join them soon.

"Ah, Kawamura and the underclassman!"

Mitsuki had been standing forlornly before the gate, but she gave a relieved wave upon spotting their approach. Judging from the antsy expression on her face it didn't look like they'd learned anything new.

"Sorry you got brought into this mess too. Thank you so much."

"It's not a bother. I'm always looking after Kawamura anyway..."

"Hey, what are you talking about?"

A flustered Kawamura protested to Wataru as he hastily bowed his head. Mitsuki giggled, invited them to come in, and showed them inside.

It was an old-fashioned one-story wooden house that was believed to be at least fifty years old, and it was in the midst of being remodeled into a studio and exhibition hall in a way that would preserve its classical beauty. As always, the plans from Shohei's office never went overboard, and they created a new space that was a skillful blend of cutting-edge design and the time-honored aesthetic of the building itself.

"We're so close to being done with just about everything else. All that's left is hanging the display pieces and cleaning, but..."

"You seriously can't get in touch with Kobayashi?"

"... Yeah. But the truth is, we've been put in charge of partitioning at the presentation party being held tomorrow night... So we also have to make preparations

for that during the day tomorrow, once the hanging is all finished. It doesn't have much to do with renovation, but since they went out of their way to put the trust in us to ask us, we agreed to do it after talking it over amongst ourselves."

Mitsuki sighed deeply, at the end of her rope. There were ten main members gathered in the Japanese-style room slated to become the studio, and they all sat on the brand-new tatami mat on the floor with troubled looks.

"It's no use. His cell phone's just not picking up. His family says they've gotten no word from him, and there's been no mention on the news of the Shinkansen being stuck."

"The last call we got from him was when he left the framer's, right? He said he was coming back to Tokyo. Did something happen after that?"

"I haven't heard word of any accidents that would fit that."

Everyone kept proposing thoughts, but no definitive plan came of them. That was only natural, since none of them could get beyond wondering if something had happened to Kobayashi. All they could do was wait for him to contact them.

Kazuki isn't here...?

Wataru surreptitiously glanced around and couldn't find any signs of Yuichi. He found that strange and wondered what must have happened, and as he did, perceptive Mitsuki spoke to him in a low voice.

"Kazuki said he was 'going out for a moment.' That was about ten minutes ago."

"Yeah? But what could he be up to when the club is in such trouble? He would surely come up with some great idea if he was here."

"He looked a little preoccupied, so maybe he's calming himself down and considering relief measures," Mitsuki said. She added, "The gap Asaka left is pretty hard to fill, but Kazuki just being here makes a big difference. It's odd saying it to someone younger, but it brings a sense of reassurance."

"A sense of reassurance?"

"Before Asaka left, he handled most of the follow-up stuff. Getting in contact with contractors, support for the university side, handling all the detailed discussions while the other members were busy with preparations for the U.S. trip. It's thanks to all the trouble he went to that nobody objected to Asaka's retirement. But... it's tough for people to take the loss of a main pillar of support, you know?"

"....."

Of course, there was a reason for that, Wataru felt.

Masanobu had a unique approach called "The Asaka Magic." He was incredibly good at getting other people on board with things. It seemed like one word from him was enough to make even the most reckless plans a reality. He also settled countless arguments and disputes within the club.

That was also the case back when Kazuki was pitching in as a part-time job and got into an argument with Kobayashi, wasn't it? That sure takes me back.

Wataru reminisced. Not even a year had passed

since then, but it felt like ancient history. Too much had happened since then, and he could barely keep track of it all in his head.

"So, the one that gathered everyone at that point was Kazuki."

"He did? But I thought Kazuki hated leadership roles..."

"He doesn't seem like he wants it even now. I mean, he hasn't even been in the club a year. He's got a different sense of charisma from Asaka too, you know? He's curt with others and doesn't know the meaning of the word eloquence, but he's trustworthy... I guess. They're pretty much opposites, but his sense of presence is similar to Asaka's."

"Ah... I see..."

It was an assessment that wouldn't please Yuichi to hear, but Mitsuki's words were ample explanation for Wataru. Wataru could easily picture him acting reluctant to be relied upon by others but still handling all of the responsibilities placed upon him regardless.

But he must hate having Asaka follow him around no matter where he goes. I mean, even without that, he was calling Asaka "half-dead" or a punk.

Yet Masanobu wasn't likely to ever come chasing after him again. Considering that, it was exasperating to think that he would always bear that hostility, but he himself had said from the start that they just weren't compatible, so Wataru couldn't really add much to that. If Yuichi took over the club that Masanobu had created and demonstrated skills no less than his, that would have been pure happiness to him.

"Still, this issue with Kobayashi is a real nailbiter. It's already close to 4. What to do..."

"If his cell phone's off, maybe it got stolen, or the battery died... Maybe he forgot it somewhere."

"With him, any of those are possible. But it'll be real trouble if the work is gone with the phone."

"Yeah, uh... that'd be pretty rough..."

Wataru could only go by hearsay, but seeing the downcast looks on the members' faces and the heavy air that hung about them, he could well imagine how serious the situation was. If for some reason the work didn't make it back, it would inevitably trigger other issues like reimbursement and responsibility.

It wouldn't stop there. Wouldn't it also suck for Shohei's office, since the club got the work through them?

At the end of the day, the renovation club was a group of amateurs, and the client was willing to entrust even students with some measure of responsibility only because they were referred through Shohei, who was highly regarded in his field. There was ample possibility that their relationship of trust would collapse in one fell swoop.

What to do, indeed. Kazuki, where are you and what the hell are you doing?

Could he possibly be consulting with Shohei?

When the possibility briefly occurred to him, Wataru hastily ruled it out. No way. Even dealing with his beloved younger brother, Shohei was dead serious when it came to business. He would follow up on the mistake, but it would be for the sake of his office's reputation and

not the renovation club, and after such a critical failure he would never pass jobs their way again.

Yeah, no way. Kazuki wouldn't ask for trouble like that. Consulting Shohei would only come after all other possible options have been exhausted. But, with that the case... I've got even less of an idea...

For the moment, figuring out Kobayashi's whereabouts came first. There wasn't much he could do either, but Wataru furrowed his brows and pondered the situation alongside the other members. Kawamura folded his arms nearby with a grimace and grunted in thought. But there was no contact, and time passed idly by, minute by minute. A thick mood of fatigue and defeat was starting to settle in upon the room.

Then...

"I'm back."

The sound of a door lightly sliding open rang through the room in blatant disregard of the gloomy mood. Footsteps walked toward the studio from the dirt floor entryway, and Yuichi showed himself as all attention turned to him.

"Kazuki..."

"Hey, Kazuki..."

He had everyone's eyes on him at once, but Yuichi was perfectly calm. He first took notice of Wataru with an expression that looked mildly bemused that he had come, then he faced the rest of the club members once more.

"I got in touch with Kobayashi. The work is safe. But I'm having him work on another matter right now, so I came back ahead of him by myself."

"H-How did you find him?"

"Was Kobayashi in an accident?"

"What do you mean, another matter?"

The questions came in a barrage, but Yuichi's demeanor remained unchanged. He had probably expected this. He waited until everyone got what they wanted to say out and things were more or less settled down before starting to explain the way things had happened in concise terms. His seasoned attitude brought flashbacks of Masanobu not just to the club members, but also to Wataru. Surprisingly, he was acting as though he had stopped caring. Wataru wondered, bewildered, what change could have happened to his mental state.

"The truth is, the reason I left earlier was because I got a message from Kobayashi."

"Eh...?"

The whole room was taken aback as one, and Yuichi apologized to them.

"Sorry for acting on my own. I figured the reason Kobayashi called me up instead of the rest of you upperclassmen was because he was in a situation that was tough to talk about. So I went outside and waited, and he called me back up. He brought the work back to Tokyo, but he noticed that he had made a huge mistake, so he tried to fix it himself."

"A huge mistake? Does that mean...?"

"He apparently forgot to make reservations with the caterers that were supposed to be called for the reception party. But the party is tomorrow night, so he had to make arrangements for the food by the end of today. On top of that, our client this time has picky tastes.

and he was explicitly told not to accept any compromises on the taste just because it was being catered. When he called the company they were supposed to pick, they turned him down because they were booked solid... He's been running himself ragged trying to find a replacement company."

"What... the hell..."

"It's one thing after another, isn't it?"

The faint air of relief in the room turned even more desperate. But Yuichi stayed as calm as he had ever been and responded.

"It's okay. It's been taken care of. I figured we could call in one of Asaka's connections for the catering, so I called him up and asked his advice. He referred me to a perfect match, and Kobayashi has gone to give them a detailed rundown. I've brought the frames and calligraphy."

"Asaka did that...?"

"For us? Really?"

"He says to hang in there. We shouldn't have any problems making the food arrangements."

At those last words, a huge sigh of relief swept through the whole room. Wataru was amazed at how much just dropping Asaka's name could change the atmosphere.

But there was something even more shocking. The others didn't pay much attention, but Kawamura seemed to notice Wataru's bewilderment. With that, he quietly stepped up and whispered low in Wataru's ear.

"See what I'm talking about now?"

"Being... out of whack, you mean?"

Masanobu admired how people like Shohai probably never had trouble no matter where in the world they went, and sat down next to him.

"Honestly.. I was wondering what could have happened for this sudden call to meet up."

"I told you before that I was coming to New York on business. I had a business meeting all this afternoon close to here, so I figured I might as well check on Mizuho while I was in the area and see your face while I was at it."

"Who is Mizuho?" Masanobu asked in reply with a dubious expression at this unfamiliar name. Shohai explained that she was his ex-girlfriend and that she had briefly been with Yuichi as well. That made her a rare kind of woman. To have gone out with both highly contrasting Kazuki brothers meant she must have had impressive mental fortitude.

"This city is great, having a forest-like park right in the middle of the city. I bet Takako would love taking Puru for walks here. The walking paths near our own house are mostly asphalt."

"What is this? Suddenly talking like you're at home?"

"Is that wrong? I have a family too, you know. And come winter, we'll have a new mouth to feed. It'll be busy for me once I become a father of two kids."

".. Eh?"

It was probably rude, but Masanobu couldn't believe his ears for a moment. It felt strange seeing the stylish man in front of him talk about family and fatherhood. Even saying things in ways like, "a new

"Yeah. Kazuki's been a little different since coming back to the country. Like, he's gotten stranger, softer, or he's grown nicer to others or something. Of course, if he matched the way he looked on the outside that kind of personality wouldn't be so surprising."

Yuichi had voluntarily chosen to ask Masanobu for help. Surely no one but Wataru could appreciate all the levels of significance in this fact.

Kazuki...

Uncomfortable sitting around any longer, the members quickly got back to work, and Yuichi joined them like it was perfectly natural. Wataru watched his figure and felt strangely uplifted.

It's hot, came the warning along with the handing over of coffee in a to-go cup. Shohei held out his right hand and looked up into the sun spilling through the trees as though dazzled, then finally turned his eyes back to his companion.

"Well, you're looking more chipper than I expected. How disappointing."

"That's the first thing you say to me after so long apart? You never change."

"I came up to visit because I was worried about you. You should be more grateful."

He was clad in a business suit that was clearly top of the line, one that seemed out of place on a bench with peeling paint chips. He had a sense of presence about him that was the same in Tokyo or New York.

mouth to feed," it just didn't seem to fit.

"What's with that face? You're really rude, you know."

"Ah, er... Sorry. I'm just not sure what to say."

"You could start with a simple 'Congratulations. I haven't even told my family yet.'"

"Ah... Is that right?"

"Yeah. Things aren't exactly stable yet, so I plan to tell them after everything calms down a little. After all, Kirie's health comes first... though she's in pretty good spirits herself."

He spoke of the whole thing like an outside observer, but his soft expression conveyed that he wasn't altogether dissatisfied with the new addition to the family either. Masanobu had always known him as a fearless king, but for some reason his beautiful wife alone was enough to throw his whole pacing into disarray, and he himself seemed to enjoy that.

"Now that you mention it... I also have something to tell you, Shohei."

Masanobu's eyes narrowed at the steam from the coffee in his hand, and he slowly elaborated.

"Last night, I got a call late at night from Kazuki. His words were, 'There's trouble with the club and we could use your help. I would ask for your instruction.' I thought I was hearing things in my sleep. The last thing I was expecting was for Kazuki to seek out advice, much less from me."

"Did he, now? That's funny."

Shohei's tone shifted faintly as though his interest was quite piqued. As he drank his coffee and

watched a stream of joggers pass them by, he murmured pointedly, "Yuichi did, huh?"

"But what could have changed in his mind? If he seriously racked his brain, he could have come up with a solution as good as yours. No, he could do that through straight stubbornness."

"Yes, I thought so too. He isn't willing to accept giving in even as a special exception, is he? But it's true. He said that it's still too premature for him to demonstrate his abilities in smoothing over things that came up in the club."

"Pre... mature?"

"That logic threw me, too. Kazuki was confident that he could have handled it himself. But when he considered the position and personality of the member who caused the trouble, he figured a new member like himself should worry about leaving more influence further on down the line. For my part, I said that if the remaining members could get over my loss, it would solidify their unity and might be better for them, but... He was one step above me."

Masanobu had been confident in his ability to keep hold of people's hearts and maneuver situations skillfully, but this time he clicked his tongue at Yuichi's calm farsightedness. And he had even taken the initiative to contact someone before whom he would ordinarily never bow his head or show any sign of weakness.

Ugh... I couldn't stand that calm voice, either.

Yuichi no longer seemed to need pointless stubbornness or meaningless pride. That was probably what he had learned in his time apart from Wataru.

But what was really frightening was how far he had mentally matured since the scant amount of time they had spent face to face at the airport.

"... Shohei."

"Hm?"

"I think it's about time you gave them some recognition. Wataru is a rare find for Yuichi. I've never seen lovers who strive through so much just because they like each other."

"....."

To be with the one you love forever.

To vow such a thing was easy, but to make it a reality? There was no tougher task.

"Don't you get the feeling you can believe in when you see those two together? It won't be that easy in reality, of course. They'll probably run into all kinds of trouble... But I get the impression that whatever happens, they won't lose sight of what's most important."

"Would you settle for that?"

"I wouldn't be happy. But if I don't start acknowledging reality, I'll never overcome Kazuki. Isn't it the same for you, Shohei? I seem to remember you wishing to give Kazuki a happy life. Where do you draw the line?"

Masanobu asked this and smiled at Shohei, and Shohei fell unexpectedly silent. Masanobu had been expecting him to retort with some hair-splitting, and he was somewhat taken aback by this.

Instead, Shohei remained silent for a whole minute before he finally opened his mouth with a squeamish look.

"Kirie, she..."

"Yes?"

"What do you think she told me after she learned of her pregnancy at the hospital and came back? She gave me a cheerful smile and told me, 'Moving forward, this will be no time for you to pick on your brother.' Damn, isn't that an awful misunderstanding, mistaking my feelings of love for picking on someone?"

"Well... er..."

"What?"

"Was that serious?" Masanobu replied, and Shohei gave an exaggerated sigh. He had already been hit where it hurt from the unexpected ambush in the form of his wife, and to hear even Masanobu, whom he had intended to use as a pawn, chastising him made his bearing subdued. This was what they meant by, "killing someone's interest."

"Kirie shouldn't even know that Wataru is Yuichi's lover. Takako apparently gripes about how I'm a 'last boss' that picks on Yuichi and Wataru and how that's why Yuichi stopped coming over to play. Well, I suppose in a sense it's true. He's grown more distant since he's being shunned."

"You surprise me. Here I'd considered you invincible, but you're a surprisingly normal person."

"Daughters are kind of tedious to deal with. I hope we'll get a son next. Tell you what, Masanobu. I'll marry Takako to you in another ten years. So join my office in the future, okay?"

"Now, look..."

Masanobu's brows creased as though it wasn't a

joke. He didn't want a problem child like this to be his father-in-law. After all, if that happened, he'd be stuck with him for the rest of his life.

"Are you telling me to place myself in your care for the rest of my life?"

"Not a bad deal, is it?" Shohei replied with a brazen smile. Masanobu found himself unable to think of a response. He told Shohei he'd think about it, then gulped down the last of his coffee.

It was around 1 a.m. when they finally got the situation fully settled. The renovation club members wrapped up one last work-exhausted meeting, and after scolding Kobayashi, who had been nothing but downcast the whole time, they were finally dismissed. They had gotten a phone call midway through from Masanobu, but they handled that call with a light post-situation report.

"Still, you surprised me today, Kazuki."

Wataru returned with Yuichi to his rental house and let out a calm breath inside his room. He wasn't being sarcastic at all. A feeling of honest admiration welled up inside of him.

"I never thought you'd rely on Asaka in any circumstances. I figured you'd be stubborn about it and insist on the club doing everything on their own until it ran right down to the wire."

"... I suppose so. The old me might have done it that way," Yuichi replied with a wry smile. His expression had a relief to it that made it look all the more attractive. He still showed vestiges of tension, but his eyes bore a sense of substantial accomplishment and a feeling of

transparency like he had gotten over something.

What could it be? I guess... Kazuki really has changed, huh.

Just last night when he had spent the night, Yuichi had spoken as callously as ever, so when could it have been that he attained such softness? It wasn't the simple fact that he stopped refusing to budge on the matter of Masanobu. It was a more dramatic, fundamental change, or so Wataru thought.

I don't really get it, but he feels more carefree than before.

"A chemical change is taking place," Yuichi said.

He said that he would free himself from his own world view, narrowed as it was by stubbornness and posturing. As a demonstration of that determination, he had removed his ring and told Wataru to wait until he regained the right to wear it once more.

Barely a few days had passed since then. But Yuichi had already accomplished a determined maturity of his own.

"Kobayashi joined the circle because he admired Asaka. That's the reason I did that. He can get worked up, and he grew afraid that if his mistake caused problems for everyone, and if my leadership as a new member got us through without any more problems, that he would surely lose his own position. That's why I went out of my way to get Asaka in on it."

Yuichi sat on the bed and explained himself wearily. Wataru was looking at him with such shining eyes that he must have figured it would be best to give

away his trick and wrap up the talk.

"If Asaka's efforts were what settled the matter, they'd think, 'Asaka's so great,' and be done with it. The club members still need his magic. It's good for their motivation and encouragement. They'd think, 'We need to hurry up and make it so that we don't have to drag Asaka into things' or something like that."

"So that was it..."

"I still hate Asaka, but... I can't let some pointless stubbornness drag someone else's name through the mud. Honestly, the only catering service I could think of that had guaranteed good taste and could act immediately was that foreign restaurant from our first shrine visit in the new year. Asaka's connections really are a treasure. I can't give in, either. Up until now, no matter how confident I looked on the outside, I never liked connecting with others, but you don't get by in a job by picking and choosing based on what you like."

Yuichi casually let slip words that would have pained him to say only a short while ago. Kazuki was definitely changing. Wataru felt like he could blink at any moment and Kazuki would become a different person.

Kazuki isn't losing out to Asaka at all.

Wataru was embarrassed to say it out loud, so he whispered it quietly in his heart.

Yuichi had probably always carried a desire to be a better lover "for Wataru." His unruly attitude had its own appeal, but from the perspective of adults like Shohei and Masanobu, he couldn't help but come across as "immature."

Still, that wasn't the man who sat before him. Wataru felt that distinctly.

I... want to get the ring back from you once more.

He thought that openly.

It might have been too soon to say that out loud. Maybe it was better to wait for Yuichi to say it. All Wataru could do was to be someone who could accept him no matter what the situation ever was. But he had never considered his bare ring finger as sadly as he did now.

I guess that makes sense. Those rings know everything about us. And yet the moment I want to remember the most, mine's off my finger.

So he would at least instill it in his body.

How much he loved Yuichi right now.

How proud he was of him.

"Wataru...?"

Yuichi spoke to him with a perplexed voice as Wataru quietly rose to his feet. Wataru walked up to him without reply and embraced him silently, and Yuichi felt a faint sense of consternation inside.

"What is it? Is something bothering you?"

"It's not that... it's not that..."

He shook his head slightly and looked back at Yuichi with burning eyes. His gaze spoke of his feelings more eloquently than any words. Yuichi was warm as though flushed to the core, and his breathing grew noticeably shallow. His body temperature was changing and his patience had run low.

"... Dummy." Yuichi murmured in a husky

voice as he remained in Wataru's embrace. The sultry, romantic tone made Wataru's chest shudder, and Wataru found himself at a loss for what to reply. If he opened his mouth now, there was no telling how much he would embarrass himself.

But Yuichi lifted his face without betraying the slightest intent.

"Wataru..."

"Yeah?"

"Do you want me?"

"... Yeah."

Wataru nodded shyly, and Yuichi stroked through his hair gently with the fingers of his right hand. His left hand hadn't healed yet, so he had continued his romancing one-handed since coming back to Japan, but something like this had already happened before and it was little more than an obstacle that they laughed over.

Wataru's posture shifted and he was pushed down to the bed. This time he found himself looking up at Yuichi. His own pestering hadn't taken much time to light a spark within him.

"Mm..."

Their lips meshed together and sucked strongly. Their breathing grew rough and dirty. The clothes that they hastily ripped off of one another lay piled on the floor in a manner akin to they themselves. The pressing heaviness pleased Wataru, and he let out many deep breaths of pleasure. He desired this so dearly, he had to be embraced to feel it.

"Wataru, it's hotter than usual today."

"Eh...?"

"It's ready to go before even getting stimulated."

The wry murmur was probably Yuichi's sole stubbornness. The part of Wataru that throbbed before being touched trembled with the desire he had spoken of. Fingers traced its contours, and as it was loved upon in that hand, Wataru gave himself over to ecstasy, forgetting even to subdue his voice.

"Ah... mm... Kazuki... Ka... zuki..."

He must have kept calling out that name countless times as he gasped. How much of himself had been devoured by those lips that wandered his body, those teeth that left such sweet bite marks?

"Kazuki... I love you..."

"I like that. Tell me again."

"I love you..."

"More," Yuichi demanded, intoxicated, as he ran his tongue over Wataru's earlobe. As Yuichi's right hand toyed with him, Wataru was already twitching and dripping honey, but he wasn't allowed to go that easily.

"Aah..."

Wataru found his arched-out chest's nipples being nibbled, a subtle irritation against him no matter how roughly he wrenched the sheets. The teeth that refused to let him near climax made him shudder in further ecstasy, and Wataru griped repeatedly that he couldn't hold it.

Their flesh rubbing together created an obscure heat, and Yuichi's fingers ran over his whole body. When Wataru was touched by his manly passion, he knew that his rising gasps would become sounds of pleasure.

"Kazuki... Kazuki, come on, please..."

Yuichi licked up the tears that formed at the corner of Wataru's eyes with relish. Wataru's gasps became pleading noises, and a voice akin to sobbing leaked out of his throat in embarrassment.

"Wataru... I love you..."

"Yeah..."

The whispers of feeling spread to clenching fingers.

Waiting eagerly for the moment in which they would become one, Wataru embraced Yuichi hard...

Wataru went to his high school graduation ceremony on a morning where cherry blossoms in early bloom swayed in the spring breeze.

Clad in his school uniform for the last time today he straightened his back and put the auditorium where the ceremony had taken place behind him. He went back briefly to his classroom for some final partings with his classmates and teachers, then took his personal things and bag and headed out for the schoolyard again. A tumult of crying and laughing among the students rang out across the area.

"It's like... Just watching fills me with emotions."

"Wataru. Hey now, what are you doing ditching by yourself? Aren't you going to the thank-you party after this?"

"Kawamura..."

Someone gave him a cheerful pat on the back and when Wataru looked, he saw that usual bright smile

He was going to a different college than Kawamura, and he thought that they wouldn't walk the same school building paths any more suddenly made loneliness well up inside him.

"What's with the long face? You must have cheered up and decided to live with Kazuki. You had some rough waters for a while, but he's been pretty cool lately. Yeah, I've changed my mind about him."

"Even if you say 'decided,' it would only be after summer when we actually do anything. I'm going to work part-time and save up money, and we're planning to take our time househunting for just the right place. I was just happy to go back to feeling that way naturally. Thanks for all the times you've worried about me."

"Eh?"

"I'm really glad to have been your best friend. Even if we're graduating, we should still hang out every now and then."

"Wataru..."

Wataru had found it a good opportunity to offer a sincere show of gratitude, and Kawamura's face grew red at that. And was that some moisture beginning to form in his eyes? Because of that, Wataru was forced to be the one to hastily smooth over his expression this time. If he let him cry at this point, it would definitely catch on. With girls and underclassman students watching them, he wanted very much to avoid that.

Still... A lot really has happened, huh...

In particular, he could call the days after he met Michi tumultuous.

He had accidentally swapped rings with the

one known around the school as a prince, he'd been treated coldly without knowing why, and his backlash of feelings had turned into love. But even after sharing their feelings they didn't go around openly as lovers, and just having his partner be popular had caused him a fair share of grief.

My dropped ring was hidden by a first-year girl, then she passed by Kazuki who had become a college student, and then there was the whole imposition from asking Karin to pretend to be a girlfriend... It's really been a packed couple of years.

Just remembering it made him sigh.

It had first started piling up when Yuichi announced that he had placed in the top thirty in the national mock exams. Wataru found it hard to forget Shohei giving his proclamation of hostility on their trip to Okinawa, and the surprise kiss from Masanobu over summer vacation. He had resented the existence of Yuichi's "close" partner Mizuho, and they had feverishly shared many fights and more kisses.

Still, it's not like it's all over today. On the contrary, this graduation is an occasion for a fresh start between Kazuki and I.

This was no time to get bogged down in sentimentality. Wataru mustered his spirit and asked Kawamura a question.

"What time was the thank-you party?"

He had arrangements with Yuichi today so he wouldn't be able to participate, but he thought it might be nice to show his face even for a little while if it was feasible.

Until...

"H... Hey... Wataru..."

Kawamura noticed something and his complexion shifted. He had just been crying, but his eyes narrowed upon seeing something by the school gate and a small shudder might have racked his body.

"Kawamura? What's with the change in tone? Where are you even looking..."

"The gate! Just look at the gate!"

"Eh...?"

He gave in to the unusual intensity in the words and looked in that direction to see what the deal was.

In the next moment.

The air was stirred by his form.

There were girl students standing on the balls of their feet and sighs from every direction. It spread quickly, and a sweet atmosphere softly filled the air.

"Ka... zuki..."

Wataru murmured in a daze, hardly able to believe it.

No, how? It couldn't be. There was no way a man who hated uproars as much as he did would show up with no hesitation in front of people, and moreover in the place that stood out the most. Wataru reflexively repeated that to himself, but no matter how much he tried to object, Yuichi never disappeared from his sight.

"It's upperclassman Kazuki!"

"No way, why? Is he here for someone?"

"Ooh, what do I do? It's really him!"

The whispered conversations around them all sounded happy and eager. Everyone watched his actions

closely as he approached not just the girl students but also the teachers, parents, siblings and male students. Eyes darting around eagerly as if to spot his target.

"S-Say, Wataru, is Kazuki, uh..."

"....."

Yuichi was all dressed up in a top of the line coat and suit. He approached Wataru's way with an elegant stride, falling cherry blossoms in the background.

He had rare good looks that caught the eye, and he was tall with a refined style. He was the picture of perfection, as though a prince imagined in a young girl's dream had come to life. He slowly came to a stop in front of Wataru.

"... Wataru."

Everyone on the spot drew in a breath at the single word laced with love.

"Kazuki...?"

"I promised you I'd congratulate you."

A fascinating faint smile crossed his lips, and his expression practically said, "How's this?" His right hand held a small bouquet of white roses. It was wrapped tastefully without any gaudiness, hinting at the sincere feelings of the person who chose it.

"Congratulations on your graduation."

"Er... Ah..."

He smoothly offered forth the bouquet, and Wataru reflexively took it in both hands. As he did, a successive chorus of cries of shock and envy came from the gallery watching the spectacle unfold, mostly from the girl students.

"W-W-W-Wataru! You... What? You took it!"

Kawamura was blushing furiously and pitching a fit in consternation right alongside the girls. The scene was so loud that even Wataru, while he had been dumbfounded at first, found this to be ridiculous.

"Don't laugh at this point!"

"Sorry, Kawamura. It's just so ridiculous."

"What are you going to do about this uproar?!"

The girls are in a panic! Hey!"

Truly, Yuichi Kazuki's incredible popularity persisted after he graduated. And after such a showy performance on such a day, no one would listen if told to keep it down. A casual glance revealed Mai Tachibana, who had once illicitly loved Yuichi and sought to lock up Karin out of jealousy, staring in shock with her friends.

"Ah... I think they might be onto us now..."

As Wataru looked back at her awkwardly, Mai quickly averted her gaze. Her staggered side profile looked stunned in disbelief rather than disgusted. Then it turned to a wry smile, and she couldn't hold in her laughter.

"Sh... She's laughing..."

Kawamura said this as though viewing a sight terrifying to behold. But aside from Mai, the other students' uproar showed no signs of abating, and several teachers could be seen running up to see what had happened.

"Uh-oh. The teachers are coming."

Kawamura tugged on Wataru's sleeve and asked what they should do. Wataru looked to Yuichi's posture. Yuichi was looking over the expanse of riotous students with distaste and a disdainful look that didn't suit his



beautiful countenance.

"... So noisy."

In an instant, silence fell over the scene like a splash of cold water.

No one had ever seen such a distasteful and unsociable attitude from Yuichi Kazuki, who had been honored as one of the greatest star students ever and whom everyone had considered nice to others.

"Well, I knew," Kawamura muttered to himself.

Yuichi ignored him and calmly turned back to Wataru. "Shall we?" he called out in a curt voice, then took Wataru's hand and ran off.

Perhaps because it was the middle of the afternoon on a weekday, there was no sign of children playing at the children's park attached to the soccer field. The area that had splendid hydrangea blooming in the early summer was now full of leaves that had made it through winter falling to the ground in bright shades of green.

As Yuichi pulled him along, Wataru had a look of unabated excitement. He'd figured out their destination along the way and drew a sharp breath in recognition. This was the place where they had confirmed their mutual feelings for the first time and exchanged rings.

"Kazuki, that was amazing, what you did."

Wataru let out a breath and spoke up behind Yuichi as he finally came to a stop.

"That was the first time I've gotten flowers in my life. It surprised me."

"Did it impose on you?"

"Not at all. It was pretty freaking embarrassing actually, but... it made me happy. Thank you."

"Is that right?"

Yuichi turned toward him with a smile, met his eyes and started to speak, though Wataru had a good idea of what he was going to say before he even opened his mouth.

"Actually, there's one more thing I want to give you, Wataru."

"... Yeah, me too."

Wataru gave a slight smile and quietly drew the silver ring from his uniform pocket. Yuichi was holding its counterpart in his right hand. The two looked at each other, smiled as though in slight embarrassment, and quietly dropped their rings into one another's palms.

"It's too bad, huh? If your left hand was healed, I'd have put it on."

"I should be the one saying that. Well, shall we do it over again, even with just you?"

"Er, that's... Take it easy a little..."

Feeling that he might very well do it, Wataru smiled and tried to downplay it. That last act had been shocking as it was. If they played any more at being engaged, he might die of embarrassment.

"Don't talk about dying or anything on such a great day."

Yuichi correctly read Wataru's expression and cut him off quickly.

"If that freaked you out, you won't be able to handle the future. I told you. Desire and devotion drive me out of control. Have you forgotten?"

"No, I remember. I remember, but..."

"Hm?"

"It's too much for me. It's seriously embarrassing. I mean, I can't handle it. It's too much!"

"... Speak Japanese."

As the ring in his hand brought him a growing sense of reality, Wataru found himself powerfully embarrassed. Wataru watched his confused lover with a half-dumbfounded expression, thinking to himself, *What am I doing?* But having caused an incident that brought up such distant future considerations, he couldn't just blithely ignore it.

"Look, are you going that far?"

Yuichi gave him an indignant glare as if asking him who he thought that was for, and Wataru hastily closed his mouth. He tried to ease the awkwardness by slipping the ring on his left ring finger, and a feeling of relief enveloped him as though it had finally come back to where it belonged.

"Say, Kazuki. You think there might be any openings for rental houses over the summer?"

"Beats me. But who cares? We don't have to commit to anything right now. If you really want to be with me, you can always stay over at my place, right?"

"Two men in a one-bedroom apartment? It might be a little cramped..."

"If you don't want to, don't come."

It was a dispassionate conversation, but his expression remained happy the whole time. Their naturally connected fingers seemed to promise smiling faces tomorrow.

"Its size wouldn't fit any other finger."

With that exaggeration, Yuichi deposited his returned ring carefully into his coat pocket. Then he leaned down and gave Wataru a respectful kiss. The memories of first touching lips and being embraced in a reverie here all came flooding back to him. Both then and now, the whole world was within Yuichi.

"Oh, yes. I remembered something."

"Eh?"

"I promised a friend in New York that I'd send over a picture of you, Wataru. You don't mind, right?"

Yuichi slowly withdrew his lips, looked into Wataru's eyes, and smiled. Wataru started to wonder in surprise what friend this was, but his words were drowned out in his admiration of Yuichi's beauty.

"Now then. I've gotten pretty hungry. Let's go get something to eat."

"Sure."

The two of them walked side by side, gazes entwined with no hesitation.

"Kazuki... I love you..."

Wataru drew a breath and spoke his name softly. Yuichi whispered mischievously in response as though he had just remembered something.

"It's about time you started calling me by my first name."

"Eh...?"

"Yuichi. Not Kazuki. Come on, try saying it. If you don't, I won't kiss you again."

"K-Kazuki! Are you serious?!"

"Yuichi."

"....."

"What's with that look? ...Well, I guess Yuichi alone sounds a little weird."

"Huh?"

At Yuichi's bold, decisive look, Wataru got a bad feeling. He quickly straightened himself up and braced himself for the next words, watching his partner.

"... *Master* Yuichi. It's got a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

"Not at all."

Wataru shook his head firmly, but the high-spirited tyrant wasn't about to listen to him.

Wataru's resistance and Yuichi's laughing voice gave a glimmer to each of their rings.